

Technical Assistance for Environmental and Policy Change

The Active Living by Design Experience

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Active Living by Design (ALbD) grantees received \$200,000 over 5 years starting in 2003 to support comprehensive initiatives to increase routine physical activity in 25 communities across the nation. This reflected the intent of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to test a “high touch/low dollar” approach to technical assistance in order to enhance local capacity and sustain community change. The hypothesis was that this approach would promote shared investment in the program initiatives, the leadership required to sustain them, and the growth of a national movement. As such, it was imperative that the provision of technical assistance be collaborative, customized, strategic, and focused on the achievement of local objectives as well as on the needs of a broader, emerging national movement. The result was a pioneering model that supported the unique needs of grantees, created a robust peer learning network, and helped build the field of active living.

The Active Living by Design National Program Office (ALbD NPO), which led the initiative in collaboration with RWJF, deployed a multidisciplinary cadre of project officers, each of whom oversaw a portfolio of community partnerships. The project team worked collaboratively, sharing expertise in a variety of subjects including public health, community planning, economic development, parks and recreation, health policy, social marketing, and strategic communications. Project officers provided both content expertise and coaching in strategic planning, sustainability, partnership dynamics, community engagement, and other areas that were integral to the partnerships’ success. Providing multiple opportunities for engagement—from annual meetings to monthly coaching calls and webinars—was critical for building trust, seeding peer learning opportunities, and

ensuring sustainability over time. Project officers were evaluated regularly by grantees, peers, and program leadership on the basis of several attributes deemed most useful to the provision of technical assistance, such as knowledge, accessibility, and responsiveness.

Establishing trust and being transparent about expectations was central to the model’s success. Early and ongoing needs assessment helped ALbD staff build a platform for technical assistance that was customized for and responsive to grantees. For example, although crime and safety were not initially identified as significant areas of concern, these emerged over time as considerable barriers to routine physical activity in many communities. In response, ALbD staff researched best practices, identified helpful publications and toolkits, organized interactive learning network conference calls, and offered workshops at grantee meetings. In addition to content-specific technical assistance and coaching, incentives such as strategic communications training and “special opportunities” grants provided further avenues for local leaders to build capacity and address sustainability.

Another important component of the technical assistance model was the development of a learning network. The intent was to foster connections among grantees that could provide meaningful vehicles for peer learning. Several factors enhanced grantees’ ability to engage in cross-site learning. ALbD project officers were keenly aware of partnerships’ needs and successes, and continuously identified opportunities for grantees to learn from each other. In addition, project leaders were deployed as speakers, leaders, and facilitators of learning network activities in their areas of expertise; ample time for intentional networking was built into annual grantee meetings; and professional development stipends were offered annually. Some grantees used these stipends to visit each other, gaining a better understanding of promising practices and exposing key partners to new ideas. Most importantly, ALbD staff set an early and consistent expectation that local leaders’ responsibilities extend beyond their individual partnerships to the broader family of ALbD colleagues throughout the nation. Consequently, grantees built mutual accountability and trust, enhancing their ability to learn from each other.

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All of these elements combined to help shape the national active living movement, which emerged and accelerated during this period of time. ALbD community partnerships achieved many successes, which attracted new funders. As a result, grantees were able to leverage more than \$256 million in additional funding and commitments to support active living initiatives in their communities. Other funders sought to replicate the ALbD model in new geographic areas, further evidence that such a model could be more broadly disseminated. In addition, early and widespread dissemination of best practices and success stories helped generate visibility for the ALbD national program, its staff, and local leaders. This led to hundreds of requests to participate in advisory committees and work groups, grant review teams, conference presentations, panel discussions, and journal submissions.

The success of the “high touch/low dollar” technical assistance model is demonstrated in many ways, includ-

ing its replication by other funders and dissemination of best practices within and across communities nationwide. It is also evidenced by testimony from grantees, who cited the provision of technical assistance as unparalleled. In a final evaluation interview, one grantee confirmed the value of this support, stating:

This grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation really becomes a marriage. The level of support and technical assistance is something we’ve never had from other funders.

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