



Increasing Collaboration Among Philanthropies to Promote Healthy Communities

Incorporating health issues into programs of the Funders Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities

SUMMARY

Many American towns and cities are designed in a way that discourages physical activity. Public health experts agree that community design is at least in part to blame for rising rates of diabetes, obesity and other chronic health conditions.

The [Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities](#) was formed in 1999 to help nonprofit organizations and foundations coordinate their efforts to promote "smart growth"—policies and practices that reduce suburban sprawl and urban disinvestment.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) joined the funders' network in 2001 to encourage partnerships between smart growth proponents and those working to promote active living in their communities.

From 2001 to 2008, the network used three RWJF grants to infuse the health and active living perspective into its programs.

Key Results

- The project team held some 20 workshops to educate grantmakers on the relationship between health and the built environment.
- The project team published several reports on the relationship between health and the built environment, including:
 - *Health and Smart Growth: Building Health, Promoting Active Communities* (available [online](#))
 - *Foundations and Real Estate: A Guide for Funders Interested in Building Better Communities* (available [online](#))

Funding

RWJF supported this project through three grants, two solicited (ID#s 043127 and 055299) and one unsolicited (ID# 046295), totaling \$600,000. The Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities was the grantee organization for all three grants. The [Collins Center for Public Policy](#), a Miami nonprofit, administered the funds for the first two grants.

THE PROBLEM

Many American towns and cities are designed in a way that discourages physical activity. Public health experts agree that this is at least in part to blame for rising rates of diabetes, obesity and other chronic health conditions.

Smart growth is an urban planning and transportation theory that concentrates growth in the center of a city to avoid urban sprawl. It advocates compact, transit-oriented, walkable, bicycle-friendly land use. It also promotes neighborhood schools; "complete street" design that enables safe access for all users, not just motorists; and mixed-use development with a range of housing choices.

In 1999, the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities brought together some 20 foundations, nonprofit organizations and other groups working to solve the environmental, social and economic problems created by suburban sprawl and urban disinvestment. At the time, the network was not focused on the health consequences of inactivity and few funders in public health were supporting active living initiatives.

CONTEXT

In 2000, RWJF launched a suite of national programs designed to work together to increase physical activity through community design, public policies and communications. "We wanted to reengineer activity back into people's lives," said Karen Gerlach Joyce, former RWJF program officer, who, together with Katherine Kraft, former RWJF senior program officer, worked with a team of other program officers at RWJF to design the Active Living programs. The programs are described below.

- *Active Living by Design* funded 25 community partnerships, from 2002 through 2008, to develop and implement strategies to increase physical activity by changing community design. For more information see [Program Results](#).
- *Leadership for Healthy Communities* (formerly called Active Living Leadership) works with state and local government leaders to advance public policies that support healthier communities and prevent childhood obesity. The program started in 2002 and is currently funded through 2011.

- *Active Living Network* promoted active, healthy environments by building a national coalition of leaders and advocates from the professions influencing community design including land use, architecture and urban planning. For more information see [Program Results](#).
- *Active Living Research* supports research that examines how environments and policies impact physical activity and aims to identify promising approaches for preventing childhood obesity, especially among ethnic minorities and children living in low-income communities (for more information see [Program Results](#)). The program started in 2002 and is funded through November 2012.
- *Active Living Resource Center* provides technical assistance to create active communities. RWJF program officers expected many communities to be interested in Active Living by Design—and in fact, more than 1,000 communities applied for funding and were not chosen for participation in the program. The resource center was established to provide resources to them. For more information, see [Program Results](#).

In 2007, RWJF announced a commitment of at least \$500 million over five years to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015. The Foundation's efforts focus on improving access to affordable healthy foods and opportunities for safe physical activity in schools and communities. RWJF places special emphasis on reaching children at greatest risk for obesity and related health problems: African-American, Latino, American Indian, Asian-American and Pacific Islander children living in low-income communities.

THE PROJECT

In conjunction with the programming described above, RWJF joined the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities in 2001 and provided additional funds so that the network could incorporate issues important to public health and active living into its programs.

From 2001 to 2008, staff at the network infused health considerations and perspectives into its programs. They achieved this chiefly through outreach to its member organizations and other affiliated groups (via presentations, workshops, retreats and serving on the program committees for conferences), research and publications.

Other Funding

Other funders for this project included:

- Bank of America (\$50,000)
- David and Lucile Packard Foundation (\$50,000)

- East Bay Community Foundation (\$5,000)
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation (\$30,000)
- Ruth Mott Foundation (\$10,000)
- California Endowment (\$100,066)

Related Project

At RWJF's request, the project team organized and facilitated an expert roundtable about creating activity-friendly communities. The event was held in New York City, December 3–4, 2001. A report covering the meeting, *Developing, Building and Promoting Activity-Friendly Communities*, is available from the grantee.

RESULTS

During the course of the three grants, project staff:

- **Held some 20 workshops to educate grantmakers on the relationship between health and the built environment, including:**
 - "Building Opportunities for Healthy Lifestyles" at the 2005 Grantmakers in Health Annual Meeting on Health Philanthropy.
 - "From River to Rail, On Bike! A Bike Ride with the Albuquerque Alliance for Active Living," a mobile workshop held at the 2005 annual conference of the Funder's Network.
- **Held two retreats for staff of philanthropic organizations interested in smart-growth issues to explore ways they could work together.** The first retreat, held in Boulder, Colo., August 16–18, 2006, drew 18 participants from 14 organizations. The second retreat, held in Cold Spring, N.Y., April 11–13, 2007, drew 13 representatives from 10 organizations.
- **Made six presentations at various conferences, such as the pre-conference session of the Council on Foundations' 2003 annual meeting and the New Partners for Smart Growth annual meeting in 2004.**
- **Published a paper that explores the relationships between growth patterns, community design and public health.** Health and Smart Growth: Building Health, Promoting Active Communities (available online) also examines the ways that smarter growth patterns can contribute to improvements in public health and discusses opportunities for funders.

The paper is the 11th of the Funders' Network's Translation Papers series, which examines specific issues related to smart growth. See the [Bibliography](#) for details.

- **Published a report on philanthropic investment in real estate.** *Foundations and Real Estate: A Guide for Funders Interested in Building Better Communities* (available [online](#)) is a case study review of projects from 19 foundations that demonstrate how philanthropic efforts can support real estate development strategies that are aligned with smart-growth principles. The report lists lessons learned from foundations, including:
 - Ensure that a champion for smart growth real estate development sits on the foundation's board.
 - To change long-standing urban development principles, long-term investment is needed.
 - Progress in smart-growth real estate development hinges on strong local, regional and state government support. Leadership at this level can create a workable regulatory environment, provide the right incentives for private developers, and fill funding gaps.

The network released the report in 2004 and mailed it to each of its members, as well as to other foundations that expressed interest.

- **Completed research about the philanthropic landscape in 10 southern states in regard to healthy people and healthy places.** The network focused on the southeastern United States because it has the highest levels of childhood obesity and the lowest level of philanthropic investment compared to other regions. Conducted in two phases, the research resulted in two reports:
 - *Healthy People and Healthy Places in the Southeast United States: A Scan of Foundations and Opportunities. Phase One: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina.*
 - *Healthy Communities, People, and Places in the Southeastern United States: A Scan of Foundations and Opportunities. Phase Two: Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Tennessee.* See the [Bibliography](#) for details.

The research helped the Funder's Network establish new relationships with the Southeastern Council of Foundations and with community foundations throughout the region, the project director said. In particular, the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi has demonstrated leadership in the development of a greenways initiative designed to foster active living.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Connect to funders by understanding what they value, what their goals are and what they want to learn.** Funders may not immediately see how their issues—such as improving the environment or promoting social equality—relate to the way in

which towns and cities are built. Connect to funders' issues first and then demonstrate how improving the built environment can help them achieve their goals. (Project Director/Starrett)

AFTERWARD

The Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities is seeking funding to continue its efforts to promote the development of environments that encourage physical activity and active living.

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