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Active Living Resource Center

An RWJF initiative

SUMMARY

The *Active Living Resource Center* provides information, resources and technical assistance to help individuals, neighborhood groups and local partnerships create communities that promote physical activity. The resource center, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) from 2002 to 2010, focuses on communities at highest risk of inactivity and childhood obesity, based on race/ethnicity, income and geographic location.

The center was part of a suite of Active Living programs launched by RWJF in 2002 to spur physical activity through community design, public policies and communications.

Key Results

Program staff reported the following results to RWJF:

- The *Active Living Resource Center* website provides tools, fact sheets, how-to guides, videos and other resources for creating active communities
- A City-Safe Routes to School program, under which staff conducted workshops, helped 17 communities in nine cities develop Safe Routes to School programs. This work led to more focus nationally on Safe Routes to School in low-income communities.

  Read more about how residents of Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood learned how to bolster the safety of children walking to five schools.
- The Organizing for Regional Change project, to promote policies that support walking and bicycling, piloted the program in Alabama. This work spurred four cities to adopt Complete Streets policies, which call for designing all roads, except limited-access highways, for use by pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users and people with disabilities, as well as drivers.
- The Emerging Leaders Project, a college internship program helped students in civil engineering, planning, traffic engineering, public health and public administration understand how improving the walking and bicycling infrastructure can transform a community.

Program Management

The National Center for Bicycling & Walking (NCBW)—a major effort of the Bicycle Federation of America, a nonprofit corporation based in Bethesda, Md.—managed the *Active Living Resource Center.* Sharon Z. Roerty served as director for most of the initiative.

Funding

RWJF provided $4,046,825 through seven grants to support the *Active Living Resource Center* from 2002 to 2010.

CONTEXT

The 1996, U.S. Surgeon General's Report, *Physical Activity and Health*, established the health benefits of regular physical activity. Yet national statistics showed that:

- Only 54.6 percent of American adults met the recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for 30 minutes of moderately intense activity at least five days a week in 2001, according to the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System.
- Nearly 6 in 10 adults (57.1 percent) were overweight, and about 22 percent were obese, according to *Health Behaviors of Adults: United States, 1999–2001*, a CDC report based on the annual National Health Interview Survey.

A lack of physical activity in daily life is one explanation for these problems, according to the NCBW. Opportunities for physical activity have declined since the 1950s, and driving has replaced walking and bicycling for most trips, even short ones.

For example, according to the 1995 National Personal Transportation Survey, 26.2 percent of all trips among adults were one mile or shorter in 1995. Walking accounted for just 16.7 percent of those trips (*Preventing Chronic Disease*, 2005).

The built environment presents many barriers to physical activity in daily life. Communities often lack sidewalks, bikeways and trails, according to the NCBW. Even when communities have these facilities, they are often not accessible for travel to important daily destinations such as schools, shops and workplaces.

Adding Physical Activity through Active Living

Active living is a way of life that integrates physical activity into daily routines, according to staff of the National Center for Bicycling & Walking. Active living enables people to meet the CDC recommendation of 30 minutes of moderately intense physical activity five days a week. Active living includes:

- Walking or bicycling for transportation, exercise or pleasure
- Playing in the park
- Working in the yard
- Taking the stairs
- Using recreation facilities

Appendix 1 outlines principles developed by *Active Living by Design*, an RWJF national program that funds local partnerships to develop and implement strategies to boost physical activity by changing community design.

The National Center for Bicycling & Walking

Based in Bethesda, Md., the National Center for Bicycling & Walking (NCBW) helps individuals, organizations and public agencies create bicycle-friendly and walkable communities by providing information, training, tools and access to experts.

Under three RWJF grants from 1999 to 2002, NCBW created a Web-based clearinghouse and resource center to help public health advocates and others make communities more bicycle-friendly and walkable. The clearinghouse evolved into the organization's website. See Program Results.[1]

Staff from the national center also wrote and published *Increasing Physical Activity through Community Design: A Guide for Public Health Practitioners*. See Program Results.[2]

RWJF's Interest in the Area

Active Living Programs

In 2002, RWJF launched a suite of national programs designed to spur physical activity through community design, public policies and communications. "We wanted to reengineer activity back into people's lives," said Karen Gerlach Joyce, Ph.D., former

[1] The report covers two grants: ID#s 037349 and 041083.

[2] The report covers ID# 042089.

RWJF program officer, who, with Katherine Kraft, Ph.D., former RWJF senior program officer, designed the Active Living programs:

- *Active Living by Design* (2002–2007) funded 25 local partnerships to develop and implement strategies to increase physical activity through community design. The partnerships were composed of at least three organizations: at least one from health care, public health or the medical community; and at least two from other disciplines, such as planning, transportation, architecture, urban design, real estate development, parks and recreation, housing and public safety.
- *Leadership for Healthy Communities* (formerly called *Active Living Leadership*) (2002–October 2010) worked with government leaders to create policies that reduce childhood obesity by promoting active living, healthy eating and access to healthy foods.
- *Active Living Network* (2002–2007) promoted active, healthy environments by building a national coalition of leaders and advocates working in community design, including land use, architecture and urban planning.
- *Active Living Research* supports research investigating how environments and policies influence active living for children and their families. The program started in 2002 and is scheduled to end in November 2012 although it may be renewed.
- *Active Living Resource Center*—the focus of this report—was created to provide resources and technical assistance to the more than 1,000 communities that applied to *Active Living by Design* but were not funded.

THE PROGRAM

The National Center for Bicycling & Walking began creating the *Active Living Resource Center* in 2002. The resource center provides information, resources and technical assistance to help individuals, neighborhood groups and local partnerships create communities that foster physical activity. The resource center also added a small focus on combating childhood obesity.

William C. Wilkinson, executive director of the NCBW, initially directed the *Active Living Resource Center.* In 2004, Sharon Z. Roerty, director of community programs at the national center, became program director for the *Active Living Resource Center*.

Program Evolution

By 2005, RWJF had revised its national strategy in two ways that affected the activities of the *Active Living Resource Center*, and staff adapted accordingly:

- **Expanding the audience.** RWJF program officers asked staff of the *Active Living Resource Center* to expand their focus beyond the broad partnerships funded under

Active Living by Design to include individuals and smaller neighborhood and community groups.

According to Program Officer Kraft, RWJF staff recognized that many grassroots groups lacked the resources to create more physical activity-friendly communities. In response, staff at the *Active Living Resource Center* revised the resource center website to include accessible resources such as short guides and fact sheets.

However, finding "the people who meet in living rooms and libraries" to encourage them to tap these resources was not easy, according to Roerty. To do so, center staff began developing outreach programs, including workshops to help urban communities develop Safe Routes to School programs. (For more information on the federally funded Safe Routes to School initiative, see Appendix 2.)

Center staff also began to focus on helping individuals and groups in smaller communities make them more bicycle-friendly and walkable. Staff sought further local contacts by networking with participants in the workshops.

- **Tackling childhood obesity.** With obesity on the rise, RWJF decided to expand its focus beyond active living to include creating healthy eating environments and policies. RWJF targeted this work toward children, among whom obesity was increasing significantly, according to reports from the Institute of Medicine.

  RWJF asked staff at the Active Living Resource Center to add resources related to childhood obesity to its website. In response, center staff created a section on "healthier children" that covered obesity and inactivity, better nutrition and wellness policies and programs.

  Still, promoting physical activity remained the resource center's primary focus.

For more information on all these efforts, see Results.

RESULTS

Program staff reported the following results to RWJF:

- **Creation of the *Active Living Resource Center* website, designed to help individuals, neighborhood groups and broad local partnerships create active communities.** Three main sections of the website provide resources and sample projects:

  — ***Get Active***

    - Your Neighborhood. Introduces the case for making neighborhoods safer for biking and walking and ways to begin.
    - Biking and Walking. Covers ways to slow traffic and improve sidewalks, crosswalks and bike routes.

- Healthier Children. Provides information for parents and communities about why better nutrition is part of a healthy lifestyle, the relationship between obesity and inactivity and how policies can improve children's nutrition.
- Child Education. Provides information about bicycle and walking education at home, at school and at special events.

— ***Get Involved***

- Active Living Roadmap. Helps local advocates and others find and use the best available tools and programs to help make their community more walkable and/or bicycle-friendly, such as by developing a Safe Routes to School program.
- Get Started Studio. Describes specific problems and solutions, and includes a submission form for asking center staff for guidance via e-mail on surmounting barriers to more walkable and bicycle-friendly neighborhoods.
- Safe Routes to School. Includes information about planning and funding a program.
- Simple Projects. Provides instructions for projects such as creating a bicycle rodeo—a course with stations that teach and test skills such as dealing with traffic at intersections—and building bike racks.

— ***Get Support***

- Build Your Team. Suggests how to create a team that includes elected officials, professional staff and advisory boards, and how to identify good projects.
- Media Involvement. Suggests how to enlist the media in building awareness of community problems and projects.

The website received more than 3,000 visits per month in 2009 and the first half of 2010 (when the RWJF grant ended), with a peak of nearly 6,000 visits in the spring of 2010.

For information on Web content that is no longer available, see Appendix 2.

- **Created some 45 fact sheets, how-to documents and other publications, and three videos on community assessment, Safe Routes to School and barriers to walking.** These documents and videos appear on the website. As part of this work, staff updated *Increasing Physical Activity through Community Design: A Guide for Public Health Practitioners*, the most popular document on the site, such as by adding resources on environmental and social justice issues.
- **Created community assessment software, in collaboration with faculty from the University of Oregon.** These tools can be used on Windows-based smart phones or

other personal digital assistants (PDAs). Users walk around a neighborhood with the PDA, collecting data on the safety, efficiency and comfort of the routes that children are using or could use to walk or bike to school. The software creates a map of walkable or bicycle-friendly areas and those that need improvement.

This software, available on the website, includes:

— ***The Complete Streets Assessment Tool,*** to evaluate pedestrian, bicycling and transit facilities along street segments and at intersections. Complete Streets is the concept that all roads, except limited-access highways, should be designed for pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users and people with disabilities, as well as drivers.

  Program staff tested this software in 2006 by leading free community assessment workshops at five schools in three cities (two schools in Eugene, Ore.; two schools in La Crosse, Wis.; and one school in St. Paul, Minn.).

— ***The Accessibility Audit Tool,*** to evaluate the accessibility of sidewalks, curb ramps and public transportation to people with disabilities.

- **Designed the City-Safe Routes to School Program, and helped 17 communities in nine cities implement such a program.** Community leaders and parents nationwide were already creating local Safe Routes to School programs, to encourage children to walk and bike to school. However, most programs were taking root in suburban communities.

  "The city schools were being left out," said Roerty. To close that gap, center staff interviewed 19 Safe Routes to School managers and participants nationwide, and then developed a program for urban audiences that included:

  — ***Storytelling:*** The workshop leader told a story about how he or she got to school, and then told the story of Safe Routes to School, including why the federal government is funding it.

  — ***Asset mapping and problem solving:*** Program staff showed photographs of the area around a school, and community members identified local challenges and resources, such as an active neighborhood association or a park. Participants then matched challenges to assets, and committed to action.

  As of October 2007, several cities that had hosted a workshop had taken steps to improve the safety of routes to school and promote more walking and biking to school:

  — The City of Atlanta installed new sidewalks in front of Capitol View Elementary School with high buffers to prevent cars from

For students at Ames Middle School in Chicago, walking to school is dangerous. Community members came together to find ways to make the walk safer during a workshop led by staff from the Active Living Resource Center. *Read more about this City-Safe Routes to School workshop.*

parking directly in front of it, and repaired flashing beacon lights on school zone signs. Police used more radar-controlled signs that display the speed of each car on the parkway as it approaches the school.

— The New Jersey Department of Transportation awarded the City of Garfield $18,000 to educate students and families on safe walking and biking to school, and to encourage more walking and biking to school. Woodrow Wilson #5 School started monthly Walk to School days and gave students charms each time they participated.

Active Living Resource Center staff also worked with the New Jersey Department of Transportation to evaluate the distribution of Safe Routes to School grants statewide. This led to a demonstration program to implement Safe Routes to School programs in Camden, Newark and Trenton, with technical assistance from center staff.

— The Huntsville, Ala., Boys & Girls Club planned an after-school bike shop where students could repair bikes and donate them locally.

According to Roerty, this work led to more opportunities for low-income communities nationwide to develop Safe Routes to School programs. For example,

— The Safe Routes to School National Partnership started a working group on diversity, which tracked federal policy on Safe Routes to School.

— The National Center for Safe Routes to School began offering $1,000 grants to help communities apply for Safe Routes to School funding.

"We were the voice constantly pushing for programs to ensure an equitable distribution of income," said Roerty. "We think our work has influenced a strategic focus on Safe Routes to School programs in low-income communities."

For more information on the resource center's work on City-Safe Routes to School, see Appendix 4.

- **Created the Organizing for Regional Change Program to spur policies that support walking and bicycling, and piloted the program in Alabama through the Healthy Coastal Connections Project.**

The Healthy Coastal Connections Project is a partnership with Smart Coast (Fairhope, Ala.) to support polices that promote walking and bicycling in Mobile Bay and the adjacent counties of Mobile and Baldwin. This work led to the adoption of Complete Streets policies in four cities (Fairhope, Daphne, Chickasaw and Mount Vernon)—the first such policies in Alabama.

Active Living Resource Center staff:

— Helped the local project team frame a message and a communication plan

- Inventoried resources in Mobile and Baldwin counties that could support walking and biking
- Developed an interactive geographic information system (GIS) to help the local project team assess baseline conditions, and depict opportunities and areas of concern to city council members and transportation and law enforcement officials
- Led the local project team in a series of community assessments
- Trained dozens of community volunteers, advocates, elected officials and professional staff in conducting assessments and making presentations

Staff detailed each site visit in travelogues and reports so other groups can learn from and replicate the process and tools. These travelogues and reports are available on the Healthy Coastal Connections Project Web page.

- **Created the Emerging Leaders Project, a college internship program to help students in civil engineering, planning, traffic engineering, public health and public administration understand how improving the walking and bicycling infrastructure can transform a community.** *Active Living Resource Center* staff worked with staff at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and Vanderbilt University to pilot internship programs there.

  A coalition that includes the United Way, the YMCA, the county health department and Outdoor Chattanooga is managing the University of Tennessee program. The Nashville Metropolitan Planning Organization is managing the program at Vanderbilt, working with the Nashville Health Department and the mayor's office.

  The first seven internships, including five at the University of Tennessee and two at Vanderbilt, began in fall 2010. Sample projects include:

  - Developing and implementing strategic wellness plans in two Chattanooga neighborhoods
  - Working on health impact assessments for the Nashville Metropolitan Planning Organization

- **Held about 200 Walkable Community workshops from 2004 to July 2010.** These four-hour workshops, led by expert trainers from the National Center for Bicycling & Walking, convened local officials, advocates and residents to consider how to encourage walking within their communities.

  Each workshop consisted of:

  - A presentation on the elements of a walkable community and solutions to common challenges
  - A walking tour of the community
  - Breakout sessions to identify measures to improve conditions for pedestrians

- Presentations from the breakout groups
- Agreement on follow-up actions to create more walkable environments

- **Held conference calls and webinars for individuals and members of neighborhood groups and local partnerships, who heard from experts and exchanged ideas and experiences on an array of topics.** Conference calls and webinars through November 2007 were:
  - "Tips on Fundraising for Small Non-Profits," April 2007 (conference call)
  - "Complete Streets," July 2007 (webinar)
  - "Perceived Barriers to Walking and Biking," October 2007 (webinar)
  - "Getting Children and Youth to Walk and Cycle More," November 2007 (webinar)

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Ensure communitywide participation in a project.** In City-Safe Routes to School workshops, staff involved parents, teachers, crossing guards, police officers and representatives from other organizations and agencies that cared about the school and the neighborhood. That enabled the workshops to reflect the knowledge and needs of the whole community. (Program Director/Roerty)

2. **Stimulate discussion with visual aids.** In the Safe Routes to School workshops, staff used photographs or videos of the route to school to spur discussion and action. For example, a video of a route to a Brooklyn school showed that most people rolled through a stop sign less than a block away. After seeing the video, police agreed to post an officer at the intersection. (Program Director/Roerty)

3. **Involve kids in projects that affect them.** Starting in 2007, staff brought kids into the Safe Routes to School workshops or worked with them before the workshops to ask what walking or biking to school or around the neighborhood was like. "This brought issues to light and motivated community members to take action quicker," said Roerty.

4. **Help communities plan gradual changes, especially when resources are tight.** In the Healthy Coastal Communities project, center staff helped Smart Coast create a five-year strategic plan broken down into one-year increments. "They had a lot of enthusiasm, ideas and energy. It was about figuring out what they wanted to do and what they could do in years 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5," said Roerty.

   To reinforce the wisdom of working in discrete steps, center staff pointed to Portland, Ore., which became more bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly over a 20-year period.

5. **When funding is limited, present a project as enriching an existing effort rather than as something new.** Staff worked with communities already promoting active

living to build on those efforts. For example, Smart Coast was working on Safe Routes to School and became interested in Complete Streets when staff approached the organization about participating in the Organizing for Regional Change program. (Program Director/Roerty)

6. **Not every community will move at the same speed, so temper expectations for achievable outcomes.** In the City-Safe Routes to School program, every community has a different set of resources and needs. In some communities, "success" meant that the community took 10 actions as a result of a workshop or meeting. In other communities, "success" meant that people formed a group or agreed to have another meeting. (Program Director/Roerty)

7. **Cite local "success" stories.** "People relate best to projects that are closest to them," said Roerty. "For example, if we are working in Birmingham, Ala., we might point to a similar problem and solution that worked in Huntsville or Atlanta."

8. **Provide resources that can be customized to different communities.** For example, the *Active Living Resource Center* offered brochures in both English and Spanish. Some of its publications also allow organizations to add their logo and contact information. (Program Director/Roerty)

9. **Use technology to make the transfer of information and ideas simple and appealing, not for its own sake.** Resource center staff tried to reach their target audience through Facebook. However, they found that most of that audience did not use Facebook, and that in-person meetings were more effective. (Program Director/Roerty)

10. **Track a project's results over time, and highlight incremental progress.** "Grassroots and advocacy groups have a way of counting their defeats much more than giving themselves credit for the building blocks that eventually lead to the big or more tangible thing—the enactment of the policy or the initiation of a new program, the ribbon-cutting on a new trail, sidewalk or bike path," said Roerty.

    "In our work and through our resources, we emphasize the importance of a sustained effort with sequenced and doable steps. And we try to stress the importance of before and after pictures and recording milestones."

AFTERWARD

RWJF funding for the *Active Living Resource Center* ended in July 2010. The National Center for Bicycling & Walking is maintaining the center, and plans to continue to add Web content.

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APPENDIX 1

Active Living Principles from *Active Living by Design*

1. Physical activity is a behavior that can improve health and quality of life.
2. Everyone, regardless of age, gender, language, ethnicity, economic status or ability, should have safe, convenient and affordable choices for physical activity.
3. Places should be designed to provide a variety of opportunities for physical activity and should accommodate a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
4. Development patterns should encourage mixed uses, compact design and a variety of transportation choices.
5. Buildings should be designed and oriented to promote opportunities for active living, especially active transportation.
6. Transportation systems, including transit, should provide safe, convenient and affordable access to housing, worksites, schools and community services.
7. Parks and green space, including trails, should be safe, accessible and part of a transportation network that connects destinations of interest, such as housing, worksites, schools, community services and other places with a high population density.
8. Municipalities and other governing bodies should plan for ongoing interdisciplinary collaboration, promotion of facilities, behavioral supports, policies that institutionalize the vision of active living and routine maintenance that ensures continued safety, quality and attractiveness of the physical infrastructure.
9. Community governing and planning processes should address the multiple impacts of the built environment and transportation choices on residents' ability to be physically active.

APPENDIX 2

The Safe Routes to School Program

The federal Safe Routes to School program "empowers communities to make walking and bicycling to school a safe and routine activity once again," according to the Federal Highway Administration. The program addresses the decline in the number of children walking or bicycling to school, which decreased from about 50 percent in 1969 to less than 15 percent in 2001, according to a survey by the agency.

Congress established Safe Routes to School in July 2005, when it approved the $286.5 billion transportation act known as SAFETEA-LU. That legislation included $612 million for the new program. Each state received at least $1 million per year for Safe Routes to School from 2006 to 2009, administered through the state's transportation department.

APPENDIX 3

Previous Web Content

The following Web content from the *Active Living Resource Center* is no longer available.

- **The Experts Directory, which allowed people to search for assistance in creating activity-friendly communities by topic, state or region.** Center staff identified experts in areas such as:
  - Bike lanes
  - Safe Routes to School
  - Community planning
  - Walkable/bicycle-friendly communities

  Experts included representatives of neighborhood and community groups and professionals in various fields related to active living, as well as consultants (who charge for services). As of October 2007, the directory listed more than 100 experts from over 30 states.

- **The Share Success Stories section, which cited model projects that other communities could emulate.** Communities could search this section by type of program or state and geographic region, and add their own success stories. As of October 2007, almost two dozen communities had contributed a story.

  Other sections of the website, such as Safe Routes to School and Healthier Children, also point to successful models.

For example: the historic central business district of Adrian, Mich., is more pedestrian-friendly now, thanks to new flower boxes and baskets, pedestrian benches, free parking and other improvements.

APPENDIX 4

The Active Living Resource Center City-Safe Routes to School Program

The Pilot Program in 2006

In 2006, staff from the *Active Living Resource Center* implemented the pilot program at five schools:

- Ames Middle School and McCutcheon Elementary School, Chicago.
- Ensley Head Start program and Wenonah Elementary School, Birmingham, Ala.
- Monroe Community School, St. Paul, Minn.

For more information, see City-Safe Routes to School: Pilot Programs—2006.

The Expanded Program in 2007

In 2007, staff from the *Active Living Resource Center* oversaw the City-Safe Routes to School program at 12 schools:

- Capitol View Elementary School and Benteen Elementary School, Atlanta.
- Woodrow Wilson School #5 and Roosevelt School #7 (both elementary schools), Garfield, N.J.
- Thaddeus Stevens Elementary School and Excellence Charter School of Bedford Stuyvesant (K–3), Brooklyn, N.Y.
- Kerr Middle School and Whittier Elementary School, Blue Island, Ill.
- Chapman Elementary School and McDonald Elementary School, Huntsville, Ala.
- Fox Elementary School and Anne Fisher School of Multiple Intelligences, Hartford, Conn.

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SIDEBAR LIST

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