



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Active Living by Design

In *Active Living by Design*—a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) that ran from 2001 to 2009—25 communities implemented projects designed to revamp the built environment, change public policies, and expand programs to make physical activity part of everyday life. The RWJF Board of Trustees authorized the program for up to \$15.5 million.

[Read the full Program Results.](#)  
[Learn more on the program's website.](#)

### CONTEXT

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that adults get 30 minutes of moderate physical activity at least five days a week. Although people could accumulate that activity 10 or 15 minutes at a time—such as by walking or biking to school or work, or playing in a park—these opportunities have been engineered out of most people's lives.

*Active Living by Design* was part of a suite of programs launched by RWJF in 2001 that sought to address barriers to active living in the built environment—such as a lack of sidewalks, bikeways, and trails that provide ready access to schools, shops and workplaces.

### THE PROGRAM

During *Active Living by Design*, 25 communities implemented projects to change the built environment and public policies to make physical activity part of everyday life. The communities did this through interdisciplinary partnerships that integrated health organizations with those from fields such as land-use and urban planning, recreation and parks, and transportation.

Each partnership focused on:

- Providing diverse opportunities for active living, and expanding residents' access to them
- Eliminating design and policy barriers that reduce opportunities for active living
- Developing programs that expanded public awareness and understanding of the benefits of active living

RWJF used a “high-touch, low-dollar” approach to the program: providing fairly modest financial support but considerable hands-on technical assistance from the national program office, located at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.<sup>1</sup> This approach was designed to facilitate the development of strong partnerships that could sustain the active living work after the RWJF support ended.

## KEY FINDINGS & RESULTS

According to reports from the national program office:

- **The community partnerships spearheaded or contributed to 188 projects in neighborhoods, downtowns, workplaces, schools, and parks designed to create a built environment that fosters physical activity.** The most common projects were street improvements to make pedestrian and bicycle travel safer, including new crosswalks, sidewalks, and bike lanes and parking.
- **The partnerships led or contributed to education and advocacy that produced 115 policies that support active living near schools and in public spaces.** These initiatives included:
  - Municipal or county ordinances, policies, or guidelines that promote walking and bicycling, such as new design standards for local streets
  - Funding for pedestrian and bike transportation enhancements
  - Creation of municipal or county boards to advise policy-makers on active living

The partnerships also helped spearhead 45 planning documents guiding local decision-making related to active living.

- **The partnerships helped organize 115 new or expanded programs to engage people in physical activity, such as walking clubs and programs to encourage children to walk or bicycle to school.** Other projects, such as bicycle recycling (fixing up old bicycles for use by someone else) and education, supported active living indirectly.

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<sup>1</sup> Each partnership received a five-year \$200,000 grant.

- **Active Living by Design** partnerships leveraged \$256 million in grants, direct contributions, funded government policies and in-kind contributions to support active living.
- **Active Living by Design** created a [website](#) with resources, tools and links to support the partnerships and others engaged in active living work nationwide. Staff and grantees also helped produce a supplement on best practices from the program published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.<sup>2</sup>

## THE EVALUATION

Transtria LLC in St. Louis, Mo., conducted the primary evaluation of *Active Living by Design*. Methods included a survey of partnership capacity, concept mapping,<sup>3</sup> a progress reporting system, key informant interviews, focus groups, photos and videos, environmental (community) audits, and direct observation.

In addition, grants from RWJF's *Active Living Research* program provided funding for deeper evaluation efforts in two *Active Living by Design* sites, Columbia, Mo., and Somerville, Mass.

Key findings were published in a November 2012 supplement to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*,<sup>4</sup> which included contributions from evaluators, other researchers, NPO staff, grantees and their community partners and National Advisory Committee members, among others. (Articles in the supplement are available through the RWJF [website](#).)

## Key Evaluation Findings

### *Implementation Patterns Across Communities*

(Source: "Evaluation of Active Living by Design: Implementation Patterns Across Communities")

- Partnerships that prepared more for their work—such as by completing local assessments—implemented more programs, policy changes, physical projects, and promotions, which attests to the effectiveness of the *Active Living by Design* model.
- Partnerships that worked in communities where more than 40 percent of residents are non-White or impoverished implemented fewer programs, policy changes, physical projects, and promotions.

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<sup>3</sup> This technique integrates qualitative and quantitative methods to visually show complex relationships among ideas.

<sup>4</sup> 43(5) November 2012: S267–S414.

- *Conclusion:* The varying contexts, resources, and strategies across participating communities provide more questions than answers about the most effective approaches to fostering active living. The authors outline practical areas for further inquiry for those working to improve such interventions.

### **Columbia, Mo.**

(Source: “[Bike, Walk, and Wheel: A Way of Life in Columbia, Missouri, Revisited](#)”)

- “Pedestrian counts increased significantly during July 2009 and October 2009 compared to 2007 and 2008, whereas cyclist counts increased significantly during only July 2009 compared to 2007 and 2008.”
- *Conclusion:* The work of the program was associated with modest increases in active living, and continued evaluation is warranted. The use of multiple strategies, such as social marketing, local programming, and infrastructure changes, may be critical to promoting active living.

Source: “[A Walking School Bus Program: Impact on Physical Activity in Elementary School Children in Columbia, Missouri](#)”)

- Children in a walking school bus program showed no differences in the share of time spent in moderate to vigorous exercise compared with non-participating children.
- However, the negative association between the age of the children and their level of physical activity was less pronounced among those who participated in the program.

### **Somerville, Mass.**

(Source: “[Evaluation Results from an Active Living Intervention in Somerville, Massachusetts](#)”)

- Somerville students and adults were more likely to attain recommended levels of physical activity after the city implemented changes to promote active living.
- Somerville adults were significantly more likely than adults in a comparison city to fulfill recommended levels of physical activity.

The evaluators concluded that public health data can identify personal and environmental factors that predict whether residents will reach recommended levels of physical activity, which can be used to inform city policy and planning.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROGRAM**

*Active Living by Design* spearheaded a movement promoting the importance of community design in improving public health, according to Sarah L. Strunk, MHA, national program director. Participating communities showed that multidisciplinary

partnerships can spur policy and environmental changes to support active living within a relatively short amount of time.

“*Active Living by Design* has quickly grown into a movement and a philosophy that millions of people now think is the way to live,” Strunk said.

## **AFTERWARD**

As of April 2011, many *Active Living by Design* partnerships were still in place, although some had expanded or modified their focus. In communities where the partnership disbanded, new policies, infrastructure, and social norms continued to foster physical activity.

### ***Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities***

*Active Living by Design* and its staff helped inform the design of *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities*, a \$33 million RWJF program launched in 2008 to expand local opportunities for physical activity and access to healthy, affordable foods for children and families. Six of the nine sites in the initial phase of the program also participated in *Active Living by Design*. Strunk and her team are managing *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities*. Their experience with *Active Living by Design* gave her team the capacity to launch *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities*, which was one of the largest roll-outs of individual, highly selected sites in a national program that RWJF ever did.<sup>5</sup> The program is described in a [Progress Report](#).

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#### **Program Management**

National Program Office: School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Program Directors: Richard E. Killingsworth, MPH, (2001 through part of 2005); and Sarah L. Strunk, MHA (2005 on)

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<sup>5</sup> RWJF funded 49 sites within a single year, and 40 of those within a single round of funding.