Three California Communities Make Neighborhoods More Walkable for Seniors

Developing walkable neighborhoods for seniors

SUMMARY

From 2002 to 2005, the California Center for Physical Activity helped three communities promote safe and accessible neighborhood walking routes for seniors. The center is a partnership of the California Department of Health Services and the University of California, San Francisco, Institute for Health and Aging.

To carry out the project (called Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors), the center selected organizations in Sacramento, Los Angeles and Oakland/Alameda County to lead groups of citizens, elected officials and staff of community agencies in advocating for environmental and policy changes to foster walking by seniors.

Key Results

Each site achieved different results as they worked toward the common goal of making neighborhoods more walkable for seniors:

- United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County formed 12 walking groups with over 250 participants and inaugurated a Healthy Living Festival attended by 700 seniors and their families in 2004. This project is continuing with strong citizen involvement and financial support from businesses and foundations.

- The Sacramento project organized two walking groups, one in a low-income, African-American neighborhood. To improve the walking environment in the low-income neighborhood, members of the walking group applied for and received support from Rebuilding Together to renovate 15 homes along a walking route that had been littered with debris. Walking group members owned eight of the 15 homes.

- In a largely Latino area of East Los Angeles, the Boyle Heights project coordinated a Senior Health and Fitness Day and created a Neighborhood Pedestrian Improvement Plan. The Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority is using the plan to design a light rail transit stop for the area.
**Funding**

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) provided $154,695 in support for this *unsolicited* project.

**THE PROBLEM**

Few adults 50 years and older achieve the recommended 30 or more minutes of moderate physical activity on five or more days per week, according to data from *State of Aging and Health in America 2007*, a joint publication of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Merck Company.

Americans become less active as they age. About 28 percent of 65 to 74-year-olds and about 36 percent of those over 75 are inactive, meaning they engage in no leisure-time physical activity.

Walking, preferably on routes near their homes, can motivate older adults to be more physically active. However, many older adults are reluctant to walk in their neighborhoods because of well-founded safety concerns.

According to a fact sheet prepared by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s Center for Statistics and Analysis in the U.S Department of Transportation, pedestrians over the age of 70 are much more vulnerable to serious injury or death when struck by a motor vehicle than any other age group.

Programs such as *Safe Routes to School* have been effective in making walking safer for students and younger adults. Yet, few interventions have focused on making walking easier, safer and more comfortable for older adults.

**CONTEXT**

This grant was made at the time RWJF had a program management team focused on health and behavior and active living. The team created an Active Aging portfolio of grants, including:

- *Active for Life: Increasing Physical Activity Levels in Adults 50 and Older®*. (For more information see *Program Results Report*.)
- Blueprint for Promoting Physical Activity for Adults 50+.
- Screening older people before they exercise. See *Program Results Report* on ID# 046841.
- Best Practices for Promoting Physical Activity Programs.
• YMCA’s program, Total Health+ for Sedentary Adults. See Program Results Report on ID# 044054.

THE PROJECT

The California Center for Physical Activity used this grant to determine whether community agencies could mobilize citizens, elected officials, members of grassroots groups and health providers to work together to promote environmental and policy changes to encourage walking by older adults.

The center is a partnership between the University of California, San Francisco, Institute for Health and Aging, and the California Department of Health Services.

The center selected groups in three California communities to receive grants of $33,000 to implement the project, called Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors (WN4S). In selecting the agencies, the center looked for evidence that they:

• Had already formed a strong injury prevention coalition or active aging task force.
• Had an existing corps of pedestrian advocates and could muster support from local government and the public health department.

The three lead organizations were:

• WalkSacramento, a nonprofit pedestrian advocacy group.
• Los Angeles County Department of Health Services, Injury and Violence Prevention Program, whose goal is to prevent the occurrence of intentional and unintentional injuries among residents of Los Angeles County.
• United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County, a grassroots coalition formed in 1991 to empower seniors to improve the quality of their lives.

Mobilizing for More Walkable Neighborhood for Seniors: Required Activities

Although each lead agency adopted different approaches to advocating for more walkable communities, they all had to conduct core community-strengthening activities. The center provided training and technical assistance as the lead organizations carried out the following:

• Neighborhood selection. The lead agencies selected disadvantaged neighborhoods as the focus of their activities, concentrating on areas with large numbers of low-income seniors and high pedestrian injury rates. These were:
  — Four Sacramento neighborhoods, including a poor, predominately African-American community.
— Boyle Heights in predominately Latino East Los Angeles, where over half of residents are poor, sedentary and overweight.

— Ashland and Cherryland, towns in unincorporated Alameda County, and various neighborhoods in Oakland, with large Vietnamese and other ethnic communities.

- **Task force formation.** Each organization built on an existing coalition or convened a new group of older adult residents, members of grassroots advocacy groups, elected officials, staff of city and county agencies and educators at local universities and colleges.

  Their role was to advocate for environmental and policy changes that would make the selected neighborhoods more walker-friendly. The size of the task forces ranged from 130 members (Boyle Heights) to 10 (Sacramento).

- **Walkability audits.** Project staff conducted these audits in their selected neighborhoods. They included:
  - Community presentations to educate older adults about the benefits of walking.
  - Walking tours to engage elected officials, the media and pedestrian advocates.
  - Surveys to identify existing walking conditions and barriers.

- **Walkable Community Workshops.** The results of the walkability audits became the focus for community workshops aimed at helping the lead organizations gain greater visibility for their efforts.

  The center subcontracted with Charles Gandy, a national expert in walkable communities, to lead four workshops in the fall of 2003-two in Oakland and Alameda County, one in Boyle Heights and one in Sacramento.

  Gandy's Walkable Community Workshops provided local policy-makers, advocates and residents with information on how communities can improve their economy and residents' health by making neighborhoods more walkable.

**Challenges**

In a report to RWJF, Lisa Cirill, the project director, noted challenges that the communities faced in promoting environmental and policy changes to create more walkable neighborhoods.

- Organizing and sustaining walking groups within low socioeconomic, underserved neighborhoods was difficult due to distrust, apathy and disempowerment. These communities also faced environmental barriers, such as broken pavements and a lack of sidewalks and crosswalks.

- In most neighborhoods, the local government was not supportive of change to make the environment safer and more walkable for seniors. The focus in these
neighborhoods had been on creating safer walking routes to schools and other strategies to encourage walking by younger pedestrians rather than seniors.

- Projects required community ownership, ongoing support and strong leadership, which were often not readily available. Staff turnover and lack of a project champion hampered the Boyle Heights project.

See Lessons Learned for ways the projects dealt with these challenges.

**Communications**

Staff of the California Center for Physical Activity and the lead organizations disseminated information about the project through:

- A symposium at the 6th World Congress on Aging and Physical Activity in 2004, chaired by Cirill, who made a presentation on the Oakland project.
- Project websites: the Center created a website with information on the three projects. United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County launched a new Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors website. WalkSacramento updated its website with information on the project.
- Radio, television and newspaper coverage of local project activities.

See the Bibliography for details.

**RESULTS**

**Case Studies of the Three Projects**

Case studies describing the different ways each project promoted a more walkable environment for seniors appeared in the Journal of Applied Gerontology, "Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors: The Alameda County Experience," and in a report to RWJF.

**The Oakland and Alameda County Experience: Walking Groups, Safer Sidewalks and a Healthy Living Festival**

The task force of the United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County worked on two fronts: to organize new activities for seniors and to advocate for long-term environmental changes and funding to sustain project activities.

- In the summer of 2004, the task force hosted the inaugural Healthy Living Festival, which attracted 50 exhibitors, 80 volunteers and over 700 older adults, family and friends. The next year, 73 exhibitors, 60 volunteers and over 1,200 older adults and their families attended the event.
The festival, now an annual event (see *Afterward*), features free health screenings, information on injury prevention, nutrition and finances and a three-mile walk-a-thon around Lake Merritt, which attracts over 500 walkers. The festival and walk-a-thon raised over $6,000 for services to older adults in 2006.

- **In another initiative, some 250 older adults joined 12 walking groups in the target neighborhoods.** Staff at United Seniors led the first six groups, but, as more resources became available, 23 older adult volunteers received training and were able to lead six additional walking groups in other county locations.

- **Cherryland,** a town in the unincorporated part of Alameda County, had no sidewalks, in part because the area has no elected officials to push for infrastructure improvements. *Advocacy by task force members contributed to the county's selection of six streets in Cherryland for the installation of sidewalks, curbs, gutters and traffic calming measures, a project costing several-million dollars that might not have happened without WN4S,* according to Lucy Wicks, the Oakland/Alameda project director.

The task force used the RWJF grant to leverage over $70,000 in funds from five California agencies. These funds helped support the walking group peer leaders, walkable community workshops, the Healthy Living Festival and other older adult health promotion activities. (See the *Appendix* for a list of funders.)

**The Sacramento Experience: Advocacy by a Walking Group Leads to Renovation of Dilapidated Homes**

- **Involved a local council member who got city staff to clean up a neighborhood.** Members of a walking group in a low-income African-American neighborhood (one of two groups formed by this project) invited their local council member to join them on a walk. When he saw the debris and other obstacles seniors faced during their walks, he immediately alerted city staff, who cleaned up the neighborhood.

- **With help from WalkSacramento staff, they applied for and received support from Rebuilding Together to renovate 15 homes along their walking route.** Walking group members own eight of the homes.

- **The project also organized a Pedestrian Crossing Symposium to examine current and future pedestrian crossing needs.** Engineers, planners, business professionals, senior advocates and members of the general public created a senior-friendly pedestrian plan that was included in the city of Sacramento's master development plan.

**The Boyle Heights Experience: Alerting the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority to the Needs of Older Walkers**

- **The Los Angeles Department of Health Services created a Neighborhood Pedestrian Improvement Plan for Boyle Heights ("Making Boyle Heights a Safer
and More Walkable Community"). The transit authority is using the plan to design a light rail transit stop slated for construction in this area.

- **The Boyle Heights project also coordinated a Senior Health and Fitness Day.** Over 200 residents, neighborhood groups, local service organizations and elected officials attended the event.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

1. **Communities that have existing coalitions and a demonstrated commitment to improving the opportunities for physical activity have a leg up when launching active living projects.** WalkSacramento started out ahead because it had already organized walking groups for seniors and was well embedded in the community. United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda Counties had to "start from scratch," said Cirill, but made up ground because of a strong executive director with clout in the community. The Los Angeles project "did fine while being funded" but was not able to sustain the momentum. (Project Director)

2. **Find a champion who is passionate about active living.** The founder and executive director of United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County was a prominent African American, a member of the county Board of Supervisors and a former city council member. According to the project director, his "undying passion and support" contributed to the perception that the project was a necessary community program, even though it did not build on an existing walking advocacy group, like WalkSacramento. (Project Director)

3. **Beware of relying on a single advocate.** Although interest among Boyle Heights residents was high, this project struggled to sustain itself because an ongoing local champion never emerged. The project's first champion retired. A Latino council member representing Boyle Heights promised to be a strong supporter, but he did not finish out his term because he decided to run for mayor of Los Angeles. (Project Director)

4. **Keep in mind that consultants may bring technical expertise but usually cannot remain committed to a project.** After the director of the Boyle Heights project retired, the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services hired a consultant from the San Diego-based Safe and Healthy Communities Consulting to do the project "leg work." Although the consultant produced a valuable report ("Making Boyle Heights a Safer and More Walkable Community"), she had to leave the project after the grant ended, creating problems for project sustainability. (Project Director)

5. **Emphasize that making an environment walkable for seniors makes it walkable for everyone.** People are more willing to collaborate once they realize that improving the environment for one group improves it for everyone. (Project Director)

6. **Engaging local elected officials is essential.** When elected officials are involved, you have a better chance of getting proposed improvements implemented. In
Sacramento, when council members saw firsthand how debris, stray dogs and other safety hazards prevented seniors from walking, they acted quickly to get the neighborhood cleaned up and helped secure funding for long-term improvements. (Project Director)

7. **Committed community residents can be project leaders, but they need training and support.** In Oakland and Alameda County, peer mentors led six of the walking groups, after first receiving training in how to lead groups and provide motivational support to fellow walkers. In Boyle Heights, residents had the potential to be strong advocates but lacked training and mentoring support. (Project Director)

8. **Community groups see the value in working together and will even sacrifice grant funds to do so.** Originally, the center had planned to fund only two lead agencies, but three met the qualifications. All three agencies had worked together in the past and were eager to collaborate once again on this project. When the project director offered the option of funding all three if they would accept slightly less in grant funding, they quickly agreed to "share the wealth." (Project Director)

9. **Folding a project into the ongoing operations of its sponsoring organization is a way to sustain it.** The Sacramento project has been integrated into WalkSacramento, its lead nonprofit, thus ensuring its long-term survival. (Project Director)

10. **Housing a project within a large state health department makes a wealth of technical assistance and expertise available to grantees.** The California Center for Physical Activity was able to provide the lead agencies with the "right training and assistance at just the right time," said Cirill. Given the limited budget, the projects would not have moved forward without this base of support. (Project Director)

For more lessons learned from 24 other RWJF-funded projects to promote physical activity, see *Lessons Learned: Promoting Physical Activity at the Community Level* (available online at the RWJF website).

**AFTERWARD**

To support the three projects following the close of the grant, the California Center for Physical Activity took the following steps:

- Awarded the Oakland and Sacramento projects $5,000 from CDC block grant funds.
- Absorbed the projects into its Walkable Community Workshops, a program to promote walking by Californians of all ages and abilities. The workshops focus on Safe Routes to School, Safe Routes to Transit, Safe Access to Healthy Foods and Safe Routes for Seniors.
- Through its California Active Aging Network, provided ongoing educational and technical assistance to the three project leaders on senior mobility and universal design.
The Oakland/Alameda County project has established a strong base for sustaining itself. It has:

- Formed an Active Living Festival Steering Committee and Healthy Living Advisory Council to support ongoing senior mobility activities and to launch new activities for other special populations.
- Scheduled the 4th Annual Healthy Living Festival for July 2007 with a budget of over $60,000. (Details online at the festival website.)
- Explored expanding to other Alameda County neighborhoods and incorporating the neighborhood pedestrian plans into the larger citywide or countywide redevelopment projects.

WalkSacramento has absorbed Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors into its ongoing activities. The Boyle Heights project struggled to sustain itself. To help, the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services submitted a proposal to a California foundation to start walking clubs and provide *Tai Chi* classes for seniors.

---

*Prepared by: Jayme Hannay*

*Reviewed by: Kelsey Menehan and Molly McKaughan*

*Program Officer: Robin E. Mockenhaupt*

*Grant ID# 45562*
APPENDIX

Funding Sources for Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors Projects

Funding sources for United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County included:

- **East Bay Community Foundation**, $15,000
- **Oakland Pedestrian Safety Project Mini-Grant**, $4,000
- **City of Oakland, Department of Human Services Mayor's Commission on Aging**, $22,000
- **Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging "You Can"**, $10,000
- **California Health Care Foundation**, $5,500

Funding sources for **WalkSacramento**:

- **California Walks**, $5,000
- **Rebuilding Together**, In-kind support, volunteer labor

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

**Articles**


**Reports**


**Grantee Websites**

www.caactivecommunities.org/our-projects/walkable-community-workshops. Website of the California Center for Physical Activity provides information about the three Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors projects, with links to websites of the United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County and California Walks (umbrella groups for walking advocacy groups, including WalkSacramento).

www.facebook.com/usoac1. Facebook page of the United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors project provides lists of walking groups, schedules of event and a history of the project, with links to planning documents.

www.adgreferralservices.com/healthy-living-festival. Website of the Healthy Living Festival of the United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County includes information about the latest Annual Healthy Living Festival.

www.walksacramento.org. Website of WalkSacramento includes information about the Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors activities, which have been incorporated into WalkSacramento.

**Presentations and Testimony**

Lisa A. Cirill, "Active Aging Community Task Forces: Creating Community Partnerships to Promote Physical Activity in Older Adults," at the 6th World Congress on Aging and Physical Activity, August 6, 2004, London, Ontario, Canada.

Stephen P. Hooker, "California Center for Physical Activity's Active Aging Project: A Catalyst in Strengthening Community Capacity to Promote Physical Activity in Older Adults," at the 6th World Congress on Aging and Physical Activity, August 6, 2004, London, Ontario, Canada.