Communities across U.S. work to increase access for walking, fitness

By ANGIE ANTONOPOULOS

According to the President's Council on Fitness and Sports Nutrition, less than 20% of adults in the United States spend 30 minutes daily on a physical activity to meet the daily recommended requirement. With the support of a $2.25 million grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), American Planning Association (APA) is working with 18 coalitions around the U.S. through its Plan4Health initiative to combat two major determinants of chronic disease: lack of physical activity and lack of access to nutritious foods.

APA is one of five national organizations awarded a grant in which selected chapters and affiliates nationwide are addressing public health issues, such as reducing tobacco use and exposure, improving nutrition, increasing physical activity, and expanding access to chronic disease prevention through the National Implementation & Dissemination for Chronic Disease Prevention (DP14-14) initiative. Each coalition has 15 months to build a sustainable model to address a specific public health issue.

Anna Ricklin, AICP, manager of APA's Planning and Community Health Center and project manager for the Plan4Health program, said some strategies APA is using to increase physical activities include increasing adoption of approaches to improve community design; facilitating the adoption and implementation of complete streets policies, where all transportation users are considered—from motorists to pedestrians; and working with stakeholders from multiple sectors to focus more on health when updating city and regional plans. The coalitions are using population-based strategies with an emphasis on policy, systems, and environmental change to engage their communities and work toward reducing health disparities.

"This is an exciting opportunity to improve the health of our communities through diverse partnerships," said Ricklin. "Collaboration is key if we want to continue to create communities of lasting value that are equitable and healthy for all residents."

Health by Design in Indianapolis, Ind. is one of the Plan4HHealth coalitions focusing on increasing physical activity. APA's Indiana Chapter is working with Health by Design to use its $135,000 grant to develop a comprehensive pedestrian program and master plan for Indianapolis; implement a campaign to promote walking and walkability; and provide education and training for planning and public health students and professionals.

Health by Design is working with City of Indianapolis staff to identify priorities by analyzing census data, high-risk health areas, pedestrian crash data, as well as areas of planned transit expansion and areas where improvements can be made to existing infrastructure.

According to Kim Irwin, director of Health by Design, Indianapolis has a lot of recent momentum around becoming a bike-friendly city, but walkability has some catching up to do. Although the Indianapolis Cultural Trail downtown and the Monon Trail have provided more opportunities for active transportation and recreational fitness to more than 800,000 residents, Irwin would like to see even more options for getting around the city by walking.

“In too many neighborhoods, it is impossible to get to the places one might want or need to go—such as the grocery [store], church, a park or medical care—by foot,” Irwin said. “Sidewalks may be missing or in poor condition, curbs may prevent access for those using a mobility device or pushing a stroller, and safe places to cross may be few and far between. Barriers such as these discourage people from walking and keep them from easily incorporating physical activity into their daily routine.”

Irwin said the Plan4Health initiative gives them the opportunity to impact many aspects of people’s daily lives and enhance the overall social, cultural and economic vibrancy of their community.

“We want to raise the profile of walking,” Irwin said. “The work we do is grounded in public health. The Plan4Health initiative gives us the chance to not only make Indianapolis streets safer for people who walk, but it also enables us to encourage residents to walk for transportation, fitness and fun.”

According to a University of Utah study published in the September 2008 issue of *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, men of average height and weight (6 feet, 200 pounds) weighed 10 pounds less if they resided in a walkable neighborhood versus a less walkable neighborhood. Women of average size (5-foot-5, 149 pounds) weighed six pounds less, according to the study. The study also concluded that doubling the proportion of neighborhood residents walking to work could decrease their risk of obesity by approximately 10%.

“It is difficult for individuals to change their behaviors, but we can build environments that promote healthy behavior,” said demographer Ken Smith, co-author of the study.

With the support of a $125,000 grant from APA’s Plan4Health initiative, the Northern New England Chapter American Planning Association is partnering with Healthy Eating Active Living NH (Heal NH) to develop built environment strategies while looking at behavior through a different lens. The project involves analyzing the level of stress someone might feel utilizing the existing transportation infrastructure in Nashua, N.H., which has a population of more than 87,000.

“What this project is trying to do is look at the level of traffic stress, and answer questions such as where are people going, where do they want to go, how stressful is it, and what strategic, low-cost improvements can be made to make walking and bicycling less stressful,” said Nicholas Coates, active living coordinator of HEAL NH, an initiative of the Foundation for Healthy Communities in Concord, NH. HEAL NH, established seven years ago, is a statewide consortium that is implementing the 2014-2015 Healthy People Healthy Places Plan and is funded by several private and public agencies.

The team’s plan is to map out stressful areas of the city and study lower income census data to identify locations for potential improvements.

Level of Traffic Stress (LTS) is a rating given to roads and crossings that was first published in 2012 by Maaza C. Mekuria, Ph.D., P.E., PTOE, founder and principal of Axum Design & Engineering Corporation (ADEC); Northeastern University’s Professor of Civil Engineering Peter Furth, who also conceived the bicycle priority lane; and San Jose State University Associate Professor Hilary Nixon, PhD. LTS looks at how stressed people might feel on the road when riding a bicycle, walking or other means of active transportation versus Level of Service, the traditional evaluation approach which focuses on moving cars and trucks efficiently. By using LTS and focusing on lower income census areas, the team will be better equipped to understand how to build low-stress active transportation networks for the most people in Nashua, particularly community members that are most vulnerable.

The Nashua Regional Planning Commission created an algorithm that has been used to analyze data, such as width of street shoulders, speed limits, and turn lanes. By applying the algorithm to measure traffic stress in road segments, intersection approaches and intersection crossings, the team identified level of stress on maps for five priority census tracts. Coates said the team is now working with NeighborhoodWorks Southern New Hampshire to bring the maps to the residents and businesses of the five neighborhoods to see if the data matches the public sentiment regarding stressful areas, and to generate engagement in the project.

Through these efforts, the team is raising awareness about the benefits of building low stress active transportation networks to municipal staff and elected officials in Nashua and educating them on how a "complete streets" approach to designing, building and maintaining the city's transportation system for all users could provide safe passage for pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities.

"We want to take a holistic approach to improving health outcomes," Coates said. "We want the community to look at the city as an opportunity for physical activity, whether you're biking to work or using a trail or sidewalk."

Coates said another goal of the team is to provide a project recommendation for the City of Nashua's capital improvement plan, with a focus on underserved areas.

"Our focus is to maximize resources for physical activity for people that don't have access," he said. "Instead of planning and designing for cars, how do we plan and build our roads for whatever mode of transportation you use, regardless of economic status."

Similar to Indianapolis, Nashua offers the Nashua Heritage Rail Trail, which begins at Nashua City Hall and extends through one of the first neighborhoods established in conjunction with the development of textile mills. The Heritage trail connects to the Nashua River Rail-Trail, which runs from the south side of Nashua to Ayer, MA.

Currently, people, whether using streets or the trail to get around, encounter street crossings that hinder safe and easy navigation.

"These stressful street crossings around the city are barriers to people choosing to walk or bicycle to get around," Coates said. "Broken links to the city's active transportation networks can make neighborhoods feel like isolated islands and prohibit people from being more physically active."

Plan4Health has been adopted as a priority strategy of the 2015-2018 Community Health Improvement Plan, supported by the Greater Nashua Public Health Advisory Council, an established strong multi-agency network that has a long history improving health in the community.

"We hope this project will serve as a model for the state," Coates said. "We would like to show a success story between public health and planning. This project could serve as a model on how small cities can do this work. You don't have to be New York City or Indianapolis. You can do this on a smaller scale."

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