

The Built Environment, Physical Activity, and Health

Crucial to increasing and enhancing Americans' physical activity is the design and development of communities that promote and encourage safe activity. Healthy Places, also often referred to as Smart Growth or New Urbanism, builds physical activity into daily life by creating walkable, mixed-use communities.

Purpose of Healthy Places

One of the key aims of healthy places is to build moderate physical activity into routine, daily activities and make exercise part of everyday life. Fundamental to walkable communities are safe pedestrian environments that allow residents to walk to school or work, or otherwise remain active, without risk of injury from motor vehicles or crime.

Goals of Healthy Places: Healthy Places is an effort to balance the economic, community, environmental, and health needs of an area through planning. Healthy Places encompasses many issues including transportation, land use planning, housing, school siting, physical activity, public safety, access to goods and services, air pollution, and the gain or loss of social capital, but is not limited to these topics. Healthy Places seeks to:

- Create safe and walkable communities.
- Create a range of housing opportunities and choices.
- Provide a variety of transportation choices.
- Develop mixed land uses.
- Preserve green space.

Healthy Places Partnerships

Creating healthy, walkable communities requires buy-in, participation, and collaboration from a cross-cutting partnership of stakeholders. Some of the stakeholders that could be part of the decision-making process include:

- Public health, law enforcement, Emergency Medical Services, and other first responders.
- Developers, urban planners, and transportation planners.
- Local government zoning officials.
- Environmental protection.
- Education officials.

The Impact of Built Environment on Physical Activity

- Over 50% of American adults do not get enough physical activity to provide health benefits.
- The United States has the lowest prevalence of walking and biking, among developed countries.
- Those living in sprawling counties are likely to walk less, weigh more, and have a greater prevalence of hypertension than those living in compact counties.
- Only 13% of children walk or bike to school today, compared to 66% in 1974.
- Lower-income families generally experience a greater prevalence of overweight and obesity than those from higher-income families; they often have less access to gyms, parks, and other recreation, and healthy food choices, requiring targeted environmental approaches to foster increased physical activity.
- Fear of injury and crime are cited as the top reasons parents do not allow children to walk to school, even if a reasonably walkable path is available.

School Siting

School siting considers physical activity and safety for children attending school, as well as environmental impacts, energy consumption, economic development, infrastructure availability and costs, transportation, and social capital. Several states have passed legislation regarding school siting including **California, Maine, and New Jersey**. Other states have implemented related programs like Safe Routes to School. These states have secured federal or state transportation funding to enable and improve the safety of children walking to school.

States Address the Built Environment to Promote Physical Activity, Health, and Safety

Many states have implemented policies and programs aimed at increasing opportunities for physical activity in healthy communities. Examples include:

- **California:** The California Department of Health Services' California Center for Physical Activity obtained transportation dollars from the state transportation department, CalTrans, to develop the Healthy Transportation Network. This initiative trains local transportation and public works directors and staff on healthy places principles, enabling them to advise and provide technical and consulting assistance to local elected officials.
- **Florida:** The Florida Department of Health has drafted a memorandum of agreement with two other state agencies to facilitate collaboration on growth management issues, and include the DOH in future growth management and land use planning processes. The DOH also supports Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health (PACE EH) pilot projects in 21 counties. These efforts have enabled counties to install streetlights and develop sidewalk projects to increase physical activity and safety; secure easements for potable water projects; and begin construction on park pavilions.
- **Maryland:** Maryland has over 80 state-based programs that address healthy places. In 1997, the General Assembly passed five pieces of legislation and budget initiatives related to the built environment: Priority Funding Areas, Brownfields, Live Near Your Work, Job Creation Tax Credits, and Rural Legacy.
- **Michigan:** *The Cool Cities* initiative began in 2003. Michigan uses Cool Cities to highlight walkability as a key attribute to a "hip and vibrant" city. Participating communities receive grants for their downtown business districts in an effort to expand parks, improve sidewalks, rebuild streets, add lighting, establish farmers markets, and preserve structures.
- **Missouri:** The Missouri Department of Health & Senior Services Physical Activity Program worked with the Saint Louis University Prevention Research Center to plan and construct 13 walking trails in the Bootheel and Ozark communities. 42% of the community residents used the walking trails established by the program, and 60% reported an increase in physical activity after the trails were constructed.
- **New York:** New York State's Healthy Heart program has prioritized creating communities where the environment encourages walking and biking. The program has written healthy places activities into the Steps to a Healthier US program and has added a module to their BRFSS to measure leisure time activities as well as physical activity. The state health agency has put together a toolkit to aid local advocacy for walking and biking trails. The agency has also collaborated with law enforcement officials to create safe places for individuals to exercise.
- **Texas:** In 2001, Texas established the Safe Routes to School Program. The program aims to make it safe for children to walk or bike to school, increase their physical activity, and decrease traffic congestion around schools. Safe Routes can increase safety by constructing new or repairing existing sidewalks, and creating new crosswalks, bike lanes, and multi-use trails.
- **Washington:** Active Living By Design brings together three state departments: the State Department of Health, Transportation, and Community Development and Trade. The project works in several locations to train older adults to be advocates for their transportation and community design needs, and to effectively work with metropolitan or regional planning organizations.

For more information about state activities related to the built environment, please contact Stuart Berlow at 202-715-1623 sberlow@astho.org; Amanda Raziano at araziano@astho.org 202-715-1615; or Mara Krause Donohue at mdonohue@astho.org 202-715-1613

Sources: *American Journal of Health Promotion*; *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*; *Maryland Department of Planning*; *National Governors Association*; *Smart Growth America*