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## Healthy People, Healthy Places – Building Sustainable Communities Through Active Living

Lack of physical activity is a leading factor contributing to major health conditions such as obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes. As rates continue to rise across the country, local governments can expect to see a range of associated financial and social impacts across their communities, including direct medical costs, loss of productivity, absenteeism and disability.

Local leaders play an important role in promoting public health through creating the conditions — removing barriers, increasing opportunities and providing information — for individuals to incorporate healthy options such as physical activity into their daily lives.<sup>1</sup> Promoting “active living” may involve repurposing existing land, developing new infrastructure, utilizing design features that invite activity and creating targeted community education campaigns. Programs and policies that enable and encourage physical activity are important investments in the future of a community. This guide explores several benefits of active living and presents examples of steps cities can and are taking to increase access to healthy options.

### BENEFITS OF ACTIVE LIVING

Active communities exemplify several core elements of sustainability; they provide opportunities for increased public health, benefit the local economy, deter crime and support the environment.

<sup>1</sup> Along with physical activity another crucial factor in promoting healthy lifestyles is access to fresh, healthy foods. NLC’s publication “Developing a Sustainable Food System” presents several strategies cities are using to increase food access.

### 10 THINGS YOUR CITY CAN DO TO PROMOTE ACTIVE LIVING

1. Join [Let’s Move Cities and Towns](#), First Lady Michelle Obama’s campaign to engage municipal leaders to help end childhood obesity.
2. Adopt a [Complete Streets](#) policy, ensuring access and connectivity to multimodal transportation for all users.
3. Convert vacant or paved lots into playgrounds, parks or community gardens.
4. Form partnerships with local schools to develop [Safe Routes to School](#) programs and/or joint-use agreements for community access to recreational facilities.
5. Conduct an inventory of parks, open space, vacant land, sidewalks and recreational facilities; engage residents and area stakeholders to identify needs and opportunities to create, expand or enhance these areas.
6. Create a welcoming, safe, and attractive environment — beautify streets, parks, and trails by ensuring adequate tree canopy, lighting, attractive landscaping, art, benches and safety features.
7. Implement appropriate and attractive traffic-calming design features.
8. Create policy to evaluate the health impacts of all new development.
9. Support community programming such as festivals, charity walks/runs and entertainment in parks.
10. Develop public education campaigns to encourage active living.

A product of the National League of Cities, in conjunction with its Sustainability Partner, The Home Depot Foundation



## PUBLIC HEALTH

Regular physical activity benefits overall health and wellbeing and reduces the risks of serious medical conditions. Yet according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 25 percent of adults do not participate in any leisure-time physical activity, and rates of childhood obesity have tripled since 1980 to almost 20 percent. While several factors contribute to physical inactivity, insufficient access to safe, convenient and inviting resources such as parks, playgrounds, sidewalks, trails or other recreational facilities present common, but avoidable, challenges. In 2010, 50 percent of youth across the country lacked such access, and only 20 percent of census blocks had a park located within a half-mile from its boundaries. Studies have shown that increased access, combined with informational outreach campaigns, were highly effective at increasing physical activity.

The City of Somerville, Mass., is demonstrating the effectiveness of strong leadership through policies, programs and infrastructure improvements that increase both physical activity and healthy food choices. Within the first year of the [Shape Up Somerville](#) program, bike ridership nearly doubled, while school children reduced their weight gain by approximately 15 percent. The initiative — developed through Tufts University and now integrated throughout the city — targets all segments of the community, including schools, city government, civic organizations, community groups and businesses, and engages parents, restaurants, researchers, healthcare professionals and city staff. In an [interview](#) with PBS, Mayor Joseph Curtatone expressed his commitment to promoting access to healthy options across the city and assures residents, “We’re not telling you how to live your life, we want to make sure that we’re giving you the best options.”

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Initiatives that promote active living also create quality of life amenities that spur local economic growth. For example, pedestrian-friendly shopping areas increase property values, boost sales tax revenues, support tourism and may help to attract or retain new workers and aging populations. Property values in the city of Chattanooga, Tenn., increased between 1988 and 1996 by 127 percent following investments in open space and a system of parks and trails. Today Chattanooga’s investments in high-quality recreational and outdoor opportunities, including hiking, biking, kayaking and hosting the largest rowing regatta in the southeast, are paying “green dividends” as businesses and skilled workers are returning to the city at a steady pace. For Mayor Ron Littlefield, the city’s philosophy is simple, “make the city the best it can be for the people who live there and the rest will follow.”

Walkable access to public transportation has also been shown to yield significant economic benefits. A recent study across 15 major market areas found increased property values of homes in neighborhoods with walkable access to transit — by as much as \$4,000 to \$34,000 — compared with similar homes in auto-dependent neighborhoods. Multi-modal transit, which accommodates pedestrians and bicyclists, also adds value to a local economy by infusing transit-accessible neighborhoods with new shoppers and businesses.

## PUBLIC SAFETY

Green, open and active spaces such as parks, playgrounds and community gardens attract people to the outdoors and offer opportunities for physical activity and social interaction. Connecting these resources with transportation options such as trails, bike lanes and sidewalks further contributes to an increased social presence and sense of community. The presence of pedestrians and bicyclists also serves to increase public safety both by reducing traffic speeds and by generating additional eyes on the street to deter criminal activity.

Signs of blight or disrepair such as trash and graffiti, or lack of adequate lighting and safety features may however discourage the use of public spaces. Revitalizing abandoned, vacant or underutilized parcels of land may contribute to creating welcoming, attractive, and safe resources for social interaction and activity. Improvements to the Village Green



Park in Macon, Ga., including a new playground, basketball facilities and picnic tables, resulted in increased park usage by more than 25 percent while incidents of crime or violence dropped by more than 50 percent.

Strategies to revitalize a high-crime neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio, included adding outdoor art, transforming an abandoned lot into a landscaped butterfly garden, enhancing areas through planters, benches, trashcans and lighting and increasing police presence. As a result, major crime in the neighborhood decreased 22 percent while community involvement with the police department has almost doubled.

## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Initiatives to increase active living also offer a number of important environmental benefits, including reduced air and water pollution, decreased traffic congestion and the cleanup and repurposing of vacant land. Green, open spaces such as parks, community gardens and woodlands in particular support local biodiversity and help to minimize environmental impacts associated with storm-related events such as water pollution or flooding.<sup>2</sup>

To reduce carbon emissions from the transportation sector, many cities are embracing cost-effective alternatives such as biking and walking. Local leaders can increase opportunities and create a safe and supportive environment for biking and walking by ensuring connected lanes, paths, and infrastructure. Bike share programs such as **B-Cycle** in Denver are gaining popularity as one way cities can promote active living.<sup>3</sup> Results from the first year indicate that 43 percent of trips taken by bike replaced a car trip, thereby avoiding more than 300,000 pounds of carbon emissions and almost 16,000 gallons of gasoline; health related impacts include an estimated 6.3 million calories burned and 1,800 pounds lost. An increasing number of cities are also promoting alternative transportation through adopting a “complete streets” policy or similar initiative to ensure that users of all ages and abilities have access to options such as safe and connected bike lanes, sidewalks, public transportation and road systems.

## ACTIVE, INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES FOR ALL

Opportunities for active living are valuable to all populations within a community, especially low-income communities, and those with limited mobility or special needs. According to the CDC, only 20 percent of people over the age of 65 participate in regular physical activity. As aging populations increase, cities are encouraged to develop or support opportunities for these groups to remain physically and socially engaged within their communities.

By engaging local stakeholders, including residents, businesses, healthcare providers and schools, cities can begin to develop strategies that consider the needs and preferences of all users. Cities may consider conducting a

Health Impact Assessment or inventory of current conditions to determine vulnerable areas and populations and then work with them to identify opportunities to increase health, safety and activity. Cities such as **Kirkland, Wash.**, **Columbus, Ohio**, and **Bloomington, Ind.**, for example, have all developed citizen-engaged task forces to promote and help guide active living initiatives. Incorporating active living throughout municipal departments can also ensure these issues remain in the forefront. The **City of Decatur, Ga.**, for example has created an active living department, while several others have dedicated staff such as bicycle or pedestrian coordinators.

<sup>2</sup> Please see NLC’s publication “[Green Infrastructure: Using Nature to Solve Stormwater Challenges](#)” for more information on this topic.

<sup>3</sup> For examples of successful bike share programs and ideas to get started check out NLC’s publication “[Integrating Bike Share Programs into a Sustainable Transportation System.](#)”



## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- The National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education and Families program on **Community Wellness** provides tools and resources for municipal leaders to combat childhood obesity and promote healthy communities.
- The National League of Cities' Center for Research and Innovation program on **Sustainability** offers resources to help cities develop and strengthen initiatives at the intersections of environmental stewardship, economic prosperity and social responsibility.
- Leadership for Healthy Communities. 2010. **Action Strategies Toolkit: A Guide for Local and State Leaders Working to Create Healthy Communities and Prevent Childhood Obesity.**
- **Active Living By Design** works with local and national partners to build a culture of active living and healthy eating through community design.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Office of Surveillance, Epidemiology, and Laboratory Services (OSELS). 2010. **The Community Guide: Promoting Physical Activity.**
- International City/County Managers Association. 2005. **Active Living and Social Equity: Creating Healthy Communities for All Residents**

## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Tammy Zborel is the senior associate in the Sustainability Program and Stephanie Rozsa works in the Knowledge Development Program in the Center for Research and Innovation at the National League of Cities. For additional information about cities and sustainability, visit the sustainability section of NLC's website at [www.nlc.org/sustainability](http://www.nlc.org/sustainability), e-mail [sustainability@nlc.org](mailto:sustainability@nlc.org), and follow us on Twitter [@NLCgreencities](https://twitter.com/NLCgreencities).

The National League of Cities is the nation's oldest and largest organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. NLC is a resource and advocate for more than 1,600 member cities and the 49 state municipal leagues, representing 19,000 cities and towns and more than 218 million Americans. Through its Center for Research and Innovation, NLC provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities, creative solutions to improve the quality of life in communities, inspiration and ideas for local officials to use in tackling tough issues and opportunities for city leaders to connect with peers, share experiences and learn about innovative approaches in cities.

The Home Depot Foundation, created in 2002, supports nonprofit organizations dedicated to creating and preserving healthy, affordable homes as the cornerstone of sustainable communities. The foundation's goal is for all families to have the opportunity to live in healthy, efficient homes they can afford over the long-term; to have access to safe, vibrant parks and greenspaces; and to receive the economic, social and environmental benefits of living in a sustainable community. For more information, visit [www.homedepotfoundation.org](http://www.homedepotfoundation.org) and follow on Twitter [@homedepotfdn](https://twitter.com/homedepotfdn). Created in 2009, the Sustainable Cities Institute (SCI) is a two-part initiative from The Home Depot Foundation that provides a one-stop shop for cities and sustainability professionals to find vetted best practices from across the country to help them identify and implement local sustainable practices and policies as well as communicate with other cities about sustainability related issues and topics. For more information, visit [www.sustainablecitiesinstitute.org](http://www.sustainablecitiesinstitute.org) and follow on Twitter [@sustcitiesinst](https://twitter.com/sustcitiesinst).