Community Design: The Next Step To An Active Society?

FPG Snapshot
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Why an Active Environment Is Important

An active lifestyle is particularly important as we age because physical inactivity and obesity among older adults contribute to preventable diseases, reduced quality of life and premature death.

In 2001, the physical activity profile for older adults was mixed:

- Adults ages 65 and older were the age group most likely (36%) to meet the Surgeon General's recommendation of at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity on most days of the week.
- Unfortunately, the 65-and-up age group also had the highest inactivity rates (30%).
- Among 50-64 years olds, 29% achieved the recommended levels of activity, but about one in four were inactive.
- Similarly, adults with disabilities were more likely to be physically inactive and overweight than those without disabilities.

Older adults in both age categories have shown a modest, but encouraging, reduction in inactivity during the past decade.

To have a bigger impact on older adults' well-being and to help them live more actively, health and wellness professionals must help increase routine physical activity levels among older adults. One new direction involves promoting active living through community design.

Key Features Of An Active Environment

LAND USE PATTERNS

Local governments can restrict or encourage certain types of development through zoning. A sprawling community is more difficult to move through using active forms of transportation, i.e., walking and bicycling.

But a walkable community has various destinations near each other than make it more feasible to incorporate physical activity in daily routines.

TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

This system can accommodate active transportation by providing:

- sidewalks and bikeways
- narrow streets and intersections that are safer for older adults to cross

- crosswalks
- pedestrian caution signs
- walk signals that are well timed

PARKS, TRAILS AND GREENWAYS

A 2001 study confirmed what seems intuitive: People living near parks are more likely to use them.

FITNESS CENTERS AND WELLNESS FACILITIES

Researchers have found a link between the number of fitness centers in Northern Ireland and overall community physical activity rates.

Ideally, health and fitness centers would be part of a walkable and bikeable network of places that invite and enable older people to move through their community actively.

ADVOCACY

Advocates for health and wellness need to engage community partners. Collaborations should include transportation officials, city planners, landscape architects, recreation professionals and public health professionals as well as service organizations that typically serve older adults.

Once collaborations exist, the partners can choose from many strategies to promote health and activity in their communities.

On a smaller scale, individual health and wellness organizations can collaborate with others to improve their physical environments and implement strategies to encourage activity.

Ten Strategies To Promote Active Living

1. Conduct a community audit of activity-friendliness and access for people of all ability levels.

At the community level:

- Learn what barriers to and opportunities for physical activity exist in the community.
- Assess facilities for walking, biking and other activities to help with visualizing and documenting supports for active living.
- Identify barriers imposed by the transportation system, wellness centers and recreational facilities.
- Share assessments with local officials.

At the individual facility level:

- Assess the facility environment to uncover potential barriers to physical activity for older adults and people with disabilities.

2. Form or join existing partnerships of people and organizations interested in promoting active living.

3. Get input from older adults, including those with disabilities and activity limitations, when planning facilities and programs.

Hold community meetings, focus groups and even informal interviews with older adults to uncover valuable information that will help establish priorities.

4. Advocate for policy changes to institutionalize community supports for active living.

5. Work toward higher density, mixed-use, activity-friendly communities.

Urge local officials to encourage or require developers to locate the following elements together: housing, retail space, office space, parks and other fitness and recreational facilities.

6. Advocate for the street system to accommodate pedestrian, bicyclists, and users of wheelchairs and other mobility devices.

Voice your desire for nonmotorized transportation opportunities, including sidewalks, bikeways, safe pedestrian crossings and traffic calming features. Encourage older adults and others to be vocal about their needs.

7. Defend funding for accessible parks, trails and greenways.

During fiscal battles, funding for parks, trails and recreational facilities is often the first item cut.

8. Support public transit.

9. Back affordable housing for older adults near shopping and services.

10. Support creating and enhancing facilities with universal design principles in mind.

More information on universal design can be found at <www.design.ncsu.edu>. ∎

A Case in Point: Hendersonville, NC

In 1999, the Partnership for Health, a local nonprofit collaborative convened a task force of residents to assess the suitability of area streets for walking and bicycling.

An initial training meeting attracted more than 50 volunteers in a town of 10,000 people. Volunteers included retirees, fitness advocates, a local elected official, parents, and others. At the end of the training, a coordinator from the Partnership for Health scheduled a follow-up meeting, and the group was on its way.

The suitability assessment program gave volunteers an opportunity take on different roles in the task force. Some formed a steering committee and prioritized the road segments to be evaluated. This committee was primarily composed of local transportation, planning, and recreation professionals.

A second group formed the assessment team that rated the quality of individual road segments. This team used a standardized form that prompted raters to document the presence of sidewalks, curb ramps, bike lanes, and other features to promote safe walking and bicycling.

Volunteers spent several weekend mornings on the streets assessing and documenting key environments, particularly those near schools and shopping. A third group compiled and analyzed the assessment forms and created simple road maps that indicated good and bad areas for walking and biking.

Following this successful collaboration in the assessment phase, the task force decided to form a more permanent coalition to promote safe walking and bicycling in Hendersonville. As a result, the town Public Works Department used the group's map and other findings to prioritize future enhancements, such as crosswalks, curb ramps and sidewalks.

The Hendersonville coalition's efforts eventually expanded into promoting better land use and transportation planning. Thanks to the efforts of this group, this community has great supports for active living and residents of all ages and abilities, the authors stated. ∎

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