

Active Living By Design: Collaborating to Build Healthy Communities in North Carolina

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Active Living By Design (ALBD), a national program created to increase physical activity through community design and policy change, opened its doors in 2002. This new organization started just as public health practitioners, researchers, and funders were beginning to recognize the important influence of built environments on physical activity and health. At that time the nation was also growing increasingly aware of its epidemic of overweight and obesity, a condition closely related to physical activity levels of the population. ALBD was created as a collaboration between the Gillings School of Global Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). Although it was originally created to serve 25 RWJF-funded community partnerships across the United States, ALBD has worked formally with a variety of funders and with more than 170 communities seeking to promote active living and, more recently, healthy eating. Despite the fact that ALBD was created to provide technical and other assistance on a national level, its efforts in North Carolina are a significant part of the work.

ALBD is well known in North Carolina for its work on the Fit Community and Fit Together initiatives. In 2005, ALBD partnered with the North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund (HWTF) to develop the Fit Community initiative, along with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation (BCBSNC Foundation) and the Division of Public Health (DPH), North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. Each Fit Community partnership used ALBD's Community Action Model as the framework to improve physical activity and healthy eating opportunities in communities, schools, and worksites. Between 2006 and 2011, 38 communities were awarded two-year grants of \$60,000 from HWTF plus technical assistance from ALBD. These projects resulted in health-promoting community changes such as a 10-mile nature trail in the Rough Creek Watershed in the town of Canton, a new natural play area in the city of Goldsboro, a trail and policy change to support safer routes to school in the village of Pinehurst, the state's first bicycle boulevard

giving bicyclists priority on certain streets in downtown Wilmington, and a comprehensive worksite wellness initiative involving more than 75 worksites in Mecklenburg County [1]. In addition, 27 municipalities and counties in North Carolina received 3-year Fit Community designation awards recognizing their support for physical activity, healthy eating and tobacco use prevention through environments and policies. In an effort to focus specifically on rural communities in the state, ALBD also provided consultation and technical assistance for Fit Together, a grant program of the BCBSNC Foundation, for which 5 rural counties implemented comprehensive strategies for increasing physical activity. Health-promoting, sustainable outcomes of this initiative include new trails at a church and park in Pitt County, sidewalk improvements enabling children in Walnut Cove to walk safely to school, and a Smart Growth checklist for developers building new subdivisions in Camden County, which prioritizes walkability, compactness, and accessibility to transportation [2]. (More information about the Fit Community initiative and Fit Together initiative is available at http://www.active-living-by-design.org/fit_community_final_case_studies and http://www.activelivingbydesign.org/Fit_Together_Case_Studies.)

Over the past decade, ALBD has had a close collaboration with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), which is a national leader in built-environment physical activity initiatives and a public health role model. For example, the Physical Activity and Nutrition Branch within DPH developed and currently conducts the Move More Scholars Institute, an annual intensive 4-day training course that teaches participants how to promote and support physical activity in their communities. The course, which was initially designed for public health practitioners, has taught nearly 100 health educators, recreation supervisors, city planners, youth coordinators, and other professionals about the key elements of comprehensive community active living initiatives. ALBD has contributed to this training by helping conceptualize the learning experience, developing and delivering presen-

and adjacent to the county recreational park, a large Making Pitt Fit community garden was built with support from both CPPW and the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation. Residents can now increase both their physical activity by working in their leased garden plot and increase their consumption of healthy foods by growing their own produce. In addition, residents also have ready access to walking trails and opportunities for other physical activities in the adjacent park. A gardening technician employed with CPPW grant funds through the Pitt County Cooperative Extension provides additional support to groups throughout

the county interested in establishing community gardens. An elementary and middle school are located just across from the garden and down the road from the farmer's market, so these students take regular field trips to learn about growing and eating healthy foods.

Better access to opportunities for physical activity is also a priority of the CPPW initiative in Pitt County. Through CPPW, the Pitt County Health Department has worked with Pitt County Schools and the Boys and Girls Club to recruit 18 sites to use the Move More After-School Standards to increase the amount of physical activity in their after-school

tations on the built environment, and facilitating interactive learning exercises.

In 2010, DPH received a federal Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) award from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. ALBD worked in partnership with DPH to support 11 North Carolina communities that had received CPPW funding as they implemented small projects to make streets safer for walking and bicycling. These communities also provided the state's Healthy Environments Collaborative with local perspectives on policy barriers to creating healthier environments.

In addition to consulting on program development and providing technical assistance to community partnerships, ALBD has advocated for active living by participating in a variety of short-term statewide initiatives, task forces, and ad hoc efforts. For example, ALBD has contributed to review teams for grant programs, including the Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning Grant Initiative of the North Carolina Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Eat Smart, Move More grants of DPH. ALBD staff members have also provided presentations, testimony, and other input for the North Carolina General Assembly's Legislative Task Force on Childhood Obesity, the North Carolina Board of Transportation, the North Carolina Institute of Medicine's Prevention Task Force, DPH's Healthy North Carolina 2020 plan [3], and the DOT's Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Summit.

Important lessons have emerged from ALBD's experiences with North Carolina communities, funders, state agencies, and nonprofit organizations. First, it is apparent that the most effective "active living leaders" often operate outside the public health profession. They include city planners, transportation officials, school principals and superintendents, mayors, recreation directors, disability advocates, community development professionals, nonprofit partners, and community members with no formal training in public health. Also, community engagement in active living initiatives is critical to ensuring that the most appropriate built-environment approaches are identified, prioritized, implemented, and sustained. For example, an engaged grassroots public is more likely to advocate for long-term investment in healthier streets, playgrounds, schools, and neighborhoods. Finally, communities may feel that they work in isolation from, or in competition with, other municipalities and counties in the state and their region, particularly when funding opportunities are

limited. Collaborative peer learning networks facilitate the exchange of ideas and innovations among communities and connect newly emerging health advocates with experienced professionals and local leaders.

As ALBD celebrates its 10-year anniversary, it looks to a future filled with persistent challenges and considerable work to be done, particularly in addressing health disparities related to physical activity and transforming environments so that they support this essential behavior. North Carolina trails the nation in nearly all measures of physical activity, and the state is playing catch-up to meet its physical activity targets for 2020. In fact, the North Carolina Prevention Report Card for 2012 gave the state a grade of D for physical activity [4]. As health care costs escalate, it is even more critical that North Carolina communities support active living among children, older adults, and other vulnerable populations. NCMJ

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programs. This program incorporates at least 30 minutes of physical activity into after-school programs for children. The grant has also helped the schools create safe routes to schools for both walkers and bicyclists.

The Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce has been instrumental in working with local employers to improve worksite wellness initiatives. The Chamber leadership recognizes the critical role that health plays in attracting new business to a community and in maintaining healthy and happy workforces.

The Pitt County CPPW leadership team is made up of a

broad coalition from the Greenville-Pitt County Chamber of Commerce, East Carolina University, Pitt County Cooperative Extension, Vidant Medical Center, Pitt County Schools, municipal and county planners, and public health staff. These leaders have helped to bring about significant changes in policies across the county. The Pitt County Board of Health first adopted a resolution that broadly promotes improved nutrition and physical activity in policy formation for municipalities and local government. This resolution was then taken to planning boards and city and town councils throughout the county where it was also adopted.