

Active Living by Design

The Value of Evaluation

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In late 2001, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) created Active Living by Design (ALbD) and its National Program Office (NPO), headquartered at the University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. This initiative aimed to promote routine physical activity by funding multidisciplinary partnerships in 25 diverse communities across the nation. Starting in 2003, each partnership received up to \$40,000 per year for 5 years. To address the social and ecologic factors that affect activity, the partnerships implemented the 5P Community Action Model, encompassing strategies for preparation, promotions, programs, policy influences, and physical projects. The NPO gave technical assistance to the partnerships, which developed and implemented 5-year workplans and created a robust learning network among local partners and leaders. At the end of the grant period, nearly all of the partnerships received relatively modest 12- to 18-month transition grants to support dissemination and sustainability efforts related to key elements of their work.

This introduction addresses RWJF's aspirations for evaluation, the need to adjust those aspirations, and an overview of the articles in this supplement to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.¹⁻¹⁶

Initially, we planned an evaluation of behavior change outcomes. Even with the best intentions, the plan became unworkable for several reasons. First, RWJF wanted a proof of concept and therefore structured the ALbD funding competition so that the very best proposals would be selected. However, this arrangement eliminated the possibility of identifying an appropriate control group from the pool of applicants for a comparative evaluation design. Second, many of the winning proposals took advantage of policy and infrastructure opportunities that emerged during the funding period yet strayed from the grantees' original workplans. These savvy political and business decisions did not allow for random assign-

ment of grantees to intervention groups or sufficient lead time to develop and test evaluation tools and measures. Third, workplans were implemented in open community systems with complex decision making related to community policies and infrastructure that were inconsistent with "controlled conditions." Fourth, in many cases, local project staff had limited evaluation experience. Nevertheless, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences planned to fund a multiyear evaluation of the initiative. However, startup of the study was delayed such that baseline data collection was not possible, and all parties agreed to terminate the evaluation in 2005.

In 2006, RWJF and the NPO implemented a smaller evaluation of ALbD that focused on changes in policies and environments. The program's theory of change presumed that such changes would encourage physical activity based on available evidence at the time from the *Guide to Community Preventive Services (Community Guide)*.¹⁷ Thus, the new evaluation plan for ALbD focused on the extent to which communities could institute these and other 5P strategies. The new plan had two primary components. A cross-site evaluation conducted by Transtria LLC assessed the degree to which relatively modest grants for planning, implementation, and advocacy could achieve changes in the policy and built environments. And second, thanks to comprehensive workplans and strong capacity to conduct research, local academic partners in Somerville MA and Columbia MO received awards from the RWJF Active Living Research program to study behavior change in their communities. Because these ALbD sites achieved significant policy and environmental changes early in their grant periods, they provided learning laboratories to assess the effects on physical activity.

The articles in this supplement¹⁻¹⁶ all have limitations—but so does any real-world evaluation. The question is, given their limitations, do the articles provide a useful contribution to this field? Does this work still give us insights into how to promote physical activity in diverse settings? Because knowledge is still so limited about effective approaches to change the social and physical environments of communities, we maintain that the articles make an important contribution. In an area of such uncertainty and public health importance, the perfect should not be the enemy of the good. Together, the articles in this supplement give

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decision makers a sense of how quickly and how much the environment can change within a 5-year period. Increases in physical activity, though modest, tend to support prevailing systematic reviews in the scientific literature (*Community Guide*).¹⁷

This evaluation assessed program contributions, not attribution of change. Furthermore, we acknowledge that a single grant-funded initiative is far from being the only factor that generates such changes in a community. Since the ALbD grant program ended, new federal place-based evaluations have been initiated. The ALbD experience along with others increased confidence in the potential effects of such projects, and emerging evaluations are now able to employ more rigorous designs and more comprehensive measures. One of the legacies created by the ALbD grant program and its evaluation was to better specify the interventions that can now be tested in more rigorous studies.

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