
Activate Omaha

The Journey to an Active Living Environment

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Background: Omaha, an urban Nebraska community, represents 26% of the state's population. Activate Omaha, formed in 2003, addressed the obesity epidemic caused by physical inactivity and poor infrastructure to support active living in the community.

Intervention: Activate Omaha's efforts focused on a strategic social-marketing campaign, using baseline and annual data for guidance. Complementary programming was implemented parallel to the marketing campaigns. Safe Routes to School infrastructure projects were federally funded, and 20 miles of on-street bicycle facilities were funded privately. The mayor's Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee was formed, including directors from city planning and public works.

Results: The initiative became recognized by the community as the lead resource promoting physical activity. This enabled the initiative to be instrumental in infrastructure changes and programming targeting the underserved. The initiative leveraged an additional \$1,475,000 over 5 years. These funds created opportunities to invest in shared community resources such as providing bicycles for underserved youth, building infrastructure through Safe Routes to School initiatives, and successful worksite programming.

Lessons learned: Partners should be utilized in a strategic manner, where they are engaged purposefully and serve a role in assuring successful outcomes. Community readiness should determine the focus on policy, physical projects, and promotional and programmatic strategies, as well as the integration of these strategies.

Conclusions: Activate Omaha grew into a credible organization moving public policy and leveraging new public-private relationships through multilevel strategies. This approach ultimately led to sustainable changes in the community infrastructure and the behavior of its citizens.
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Introduction

Omaha, an urban community located in Douglas County, is the largest city in the state of Nebraska, representing 26% of the state's population. Omaha has strong seasonal climate changes and hilly topography. Omaha's trail system connects the city's north and south but does not offer connectivity east and west. The city was built for the automobile, and its physical environment negatively affects physical activity levels, similar to national trends for an overweight, predominantly inactive city.¹

Based on survey data, inactivity in Omaha is due to a lack of awareness and bicycle/pedestrian infrastructure to support an active lifestyle (MSR Group, unpublished data, 2005). In 2004, Our Healthy Community Partner-

ship (OHCP), a healthy community organization with membership of over 34 community partners, developed the first health report card. The aim of OHCP is to improve the health of Omaha by facilitating community-driven partnerships. The 2004 report card informed key public health leaders about the obesity epidemic affecting the Omaha community.² It showed 6 of 10 adults in Douglas County were obese or overweight, and only 23% reported participation in 20 minutes or more of vigorous activity per week.² There was an evident need to increase community awareness about active lifestyles and change the built environment. Utilizing OHCP as the lead agency, its existing partners and public, private, and nonprofit entities collaborated to apply for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Active Living by Design (ALbD) grant. The receipt of this grant in 2004 resulted in the birth of Activate Omaha.

The aim of this paper is to describe the journey of Activate Omaha as a result of being funded by the RWJF through the ALbD initiative. This includes the community's change in perception of the importance of an active community, the behavior change because of this perception shift, the actual physical change to the

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environment in Omaha, and the increase in social capital that leveraged additional funding by building on the 5P model³ (www.activelivingbydesign.org/our-approach/community-action-model; preparation, promotion, programs, policy, and physical projects). Activate Omaha earned community-wide credibility that increased the initiative's sphere of influence.

Methods

Setting and Population

Activate Omaha initially targeted the entire Omaha community (i.e., population of 432,921). The cost of living in Omaha is approximately 10% below the U.S. average, and the median cost of housing is \$135,700 compared to the U.S. median of \$206,300. Eighty-five percent of the population has a high school diploma or above (D. Drozd, unpublished data, 2007).⁴ The unemployment rate for Omaha is 5.0% in comparison to 9.7% for the nation, and 12.0% of the population lives below the poverty level.⁵ Minorities represent nearly 20% of the population, including a Hispanic population that has more than doubled in the last decade.⁶ Omaha is a city of neighborhoods with variation in health data across those neighborhoods.

Active Living by Design Community Action Model

Preparation. Active Living by Design is based on the 5P model: preparation, promotion, programs, physical projects, and policy (Figure 1). The initiative has used this model to drive planning and decision making over the entire 5-year grant period.

Activate Omaha's mission is to create awareness around physical activity and build an environment conducive to active living. The initiative is a partner-driven, volunteer-based, community health collaborative and used the ALbD grant funding to hire a full-time project manager to oversee and implement the 5-year work plan.

From its very inception, Activate Omaha strove to build partnerships and avoid duplication of effort. As such, the initiative recognized that other community organizations were addressing physical project and policy change needs (e.g., Omaha by Design, which is dedicated to changing the face of Omaha through urban design principles and citizen engagement). Hence, Activate Omaha, while partnering with Omaha by Design, focused on preparation and a promotion-based initiative rooted in a community-wide social-marketing campaign. The initiative's media campaign focused on promoting active-living behavior changes in the entire Omaha community.

The first year of the grant was a building year for the initiative. In order to help sustain Activate Omaha over the long term, the decision was made to operate under OHCP's multi-partnered, collaborative umbrella. This allowed the lead agency's infrastructure to be leveraged, and capitalized on strong, existing community partnerships (Table 1). Activate Omaha was driven by local data from its inception using the 2004 Report Card to provide the baseline data.

From the beginning, the core leadership team recognized the importance of building relationships and engaging partners around the findings of the 2004 Report Card.² The initiative engaged existing partners and sought out new, strategic partners to dialogue about the importance of active living and its potential impact on the 2004 Report Card indicators. Partners were engaged in specific "P" activities based on their organizational strengths and potential contribution. The foundation of this partnership positioned the initiative and its partners to successfully implement the 5P model.

Promotions. After building the partnership, the initiative worked to build its identity. A professional communication design firm assisted the initiative on a pro bono basis, resulting in the development of a logo and communication plan.

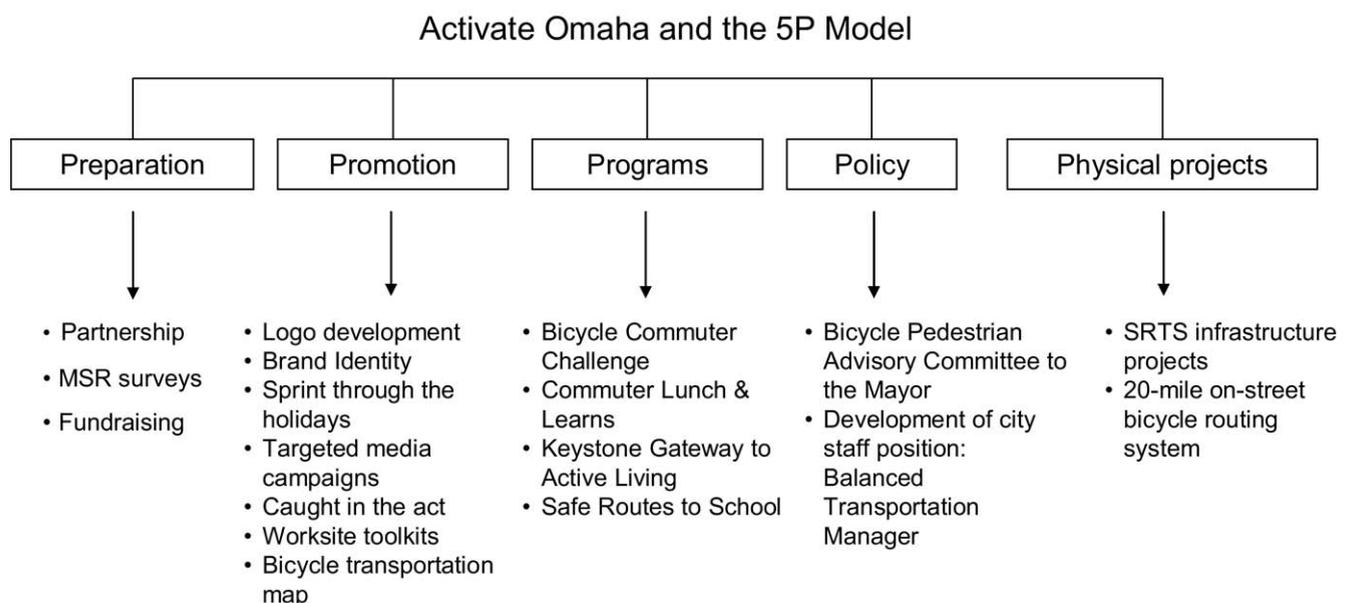


Figure 1. Activate Omaha 5P Model
MSR, market research group; SRTS, Safe Routes to School

Table 1. Activate Omaha partnership organizations

The following organizations provided professional expertise and support to Activate Omaha through their continued involvement in the partnership, development of promotions and programs, contribution to policy change, and resource development for physical projects:

Partner	Role	5P model
Alegent Health Systems	Leadership committee	Preparation, Promotion
American Heart Association	Professional expertise, funder	Preparation, Program
Amy L. Scott Foundation	Funder	Preparation, Program
Area Health Education Consortium	Funder	Preparation, Promotion
Bikeable Communities!	Professional expertise	Program, Policy
Blue Cross Blue Shield NE	Leadership committee, funder, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Promotion, Program
City Sprouts Gardening	Professional expertise	Preparation
City of Omaha departments	Professional expertise, contribution to policy change	Preparation, Policy, Physical projects
City council and mayor's office	Ongoing support, contribution to policy change	Preparation, Policy, Physical projects
Destination Midtown	Leadership committee, contribution to policy change, development of physical projects	Preparation, Promotion, Policy, Physical projects
Douglas County Health Department	Leadership committee, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Promotion, Program, Policy, Physical projects
Emspace Group	Promotions, in-kind contributions	Promotion
Felsburg, Holt & Ullevig	SRTS committee, contribution to policy change, resource development for physical projects, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Program, Policy, Physical projects
HDR, Inc	Leadership committee	Preparation
Joslyn Castle Institute	Leadership committee	Preparation, Policy
Metropolitan Area Planning Association	Professional expertise, contribution to policy change	Policy
Mass Transit Association	Professional expertise, contribution to policy change	Preparation, Program
Methodist Health Systems	Professional expertise	Preparation
Midwest Cycling	Leadership committee, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Program, Policy
National Park Service	Served on several committees, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Program
National Safety Council	Professional expertise	Preparation
Nebraska's Association of Health, Physical Education, & Recreation	Professional expertise	Preparation, Program
Nebraska Health & Human Services	Professional expertise, funder	Preparation, Program
Neighborhood Center of Omaha	Leadership Committee	Preparation, Program
Omaha by Design	Leadership Committee, contribution to policy change	Preparation, Policy, Physical Projects
Omaha Community Foundation	Funder	Preparation
Omaha Chamber of Commerce	Leadership Committee	Preparation, Promotion, Program
Omaha Public Library	Program partner	Promotion, Program
Omaha Public Schools	SRTS Committee, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Program, Policy, Physical Projects
Papio Natural Resource District	Professional expertise, contribution to policy change, resource development for physical projects, funder, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Policy, Physical Projects
Peak Performance	Program Partner, in-kind contributions	Program
RDG Planning & Design	Leadership Committee, program partner, Contribution to policy change, resource development for physical projects, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Program, Policy, Physical Projects
Sarpy Cass county Health & Wellness Department	SRTS Committee, resource development for physical projects, funder, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Program, Policy, Physical Projects
Union Pacific Railroad	Professional expertise, program partner, funder, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Promotion, Program

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Table 1. (continued)

Partner	Role	5P model
University of Nebraska Medical Center	SRTS Committee, professional expertise, evaluation and research contributions, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Program
University of Nebraska at Omaha	SRTS Committee, program partner, professional expertise, evaluation and research contributions, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Program
Wellness Council of the Midlands	Leadership Committee, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Promotion, Program
Westside District 66 Schools	SRTS Committee, resource development for physical projects	Program, Policy, Physical Projects
Whole Foods Marketplace	Professional expertise, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Promotion, Program
Wild Oats	Program partner, professional expertise, funder, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Promotion, Program
YMCA	SRTS Committee, program partner, professional expertise, resource development, in-kind contributions	Preparation, Promotion, Program

SRTS, Safe Routes to School

In Year 1, the initiative reached out to the community with a small social-marketing campaign called Sprint Through the Holidays. This electronic newsletter, provided to individuals and worksite wellness programs, gave Omahans easy tips to help maintain their health through the holiday season (e.g., healthy recipes, how and where to be active, stress reduction). Building on Year 1's success, this campaign was implemented for 4 consecutive years.

From 2005 to 2007, the initiative implemented community-wide media campaigns with post-campaign evaluation conducted by the MSR Group (a market research group) and additional funding leveraged each year. A focus group of local exercise physiologists and health promotion experts selected three themes to encourage physical activity. These themes composed the cornerstone of the first campaign: (1) physical activity is part of everyday living, (2) physical activity can occur anywhere, anytime; and (3) physical activity is fun. See Figure 2 for an example of these campaigns.

In 2005, using the focus group recommendations, the initiative promoted their first 8-week media campaign showing everyday citizens engaged in everyday physical activity. This campaign included billboards, newspaper ads, and public service announcements. The effort strove to establish brand identity for the initiative by tagging everything with the Activate Omaha website. The website (www.activateomaha.org) became the community's portal to finding out about events, programs, and places to be physically active.

The 2006 media campaign spanned 12 weeks. The focus was based on the 2005 MSR Group research that indicated 86% of Omahans want to be part of a more active community and are adamant about engaging in this activity with younger generations (MSR Group, unpublished data, 2005). The campaign centered around two major components targeting families: (1) a community-wide social-marketing campaign and (2) a community-wide physical activity event.

Caught in the Act, the social-marketing component of the second and third media campaigns, encouraged families to use the environment to be active. Advertisements daring people to be "caught in the act" of being physically active were placed in local newspapers, and incentives were awarded

to people being active in city parks, trails, and green spaces. Participants that were "caught" were also recognized at the end of the season in the local newspaper as having made the commitment to being physically active.

Once again, using the research company's post-campaign evaluation data, the third media campaign focused more on targeted social-marketing efforts rather than mass media approaches. This campaign tailored messages to a specific population as a call to action for active living as a part of families, worksites, and communities.

This campaign, kicked off by the Community in Action photography series, featured local photographers showcasing a diverse group of Omahans being active within their community (Figure 3). The photography series was displayed at a social event and then became a permanent exhibit at the local Department of Motor Vehicles and all of the Omaha public libraries, selected for their public accessibility. Again, messaging reinforced the original themes that physical activity could be fun and could be anywhere, anytime.

The campaign also included development of a social-marketing toolkit (e.g., break-room posters, newsletter content, payroll stuffers) mailed to local businesses (Figure 3). The toolkits provided wellness/human resources coordinators with a consistent community message encouraging active living for their employees. The kits include both potential activities linked to community locations and resources to be a part of a healthier company and community.

Programs. As the people involved with the initiative learned more about the depth of active living, they realized that building a culture to support daily activity was key to sustainable, effective change. They identified the need to implement complementary programming. Thus, three sustainable, low-cost programs were implemented. These included: (1) Bicycle Commuter Challenge (the Challenge); (2) Safe Routes to School initiative; and (3) Keystone Gateway to Active Living.

The goal of the Challenge, first implemented in 2006 through existing worksite wellness programs, was to expand the typical 1-day cycling event to a 14-week challenge encouraging people to bike to work. Certified instructors conducted Lunch and



Figure 2. Activate Omaha media and social-marketing campaign

Learns to educate participants in three areas: (1) rules of the road, (2) safety tips, and (3) preferred routes from one destination to another. Bike Commuting 101 packets were developed and distributed to educate cyclists about rules of the road, bicycle safety, maintenance, and tips for the commuter (e.g., how to bike commute without adequate facilities).

Participants from the Challenge were subsequently invited to participate in a technical committee to develop the Omaha's first-ever bicycle commuter map. In 2007, drafts of the Bicycle Transportation Map were produced and distributed to participants in order to field-test the map's usability.

The 2008 Challenge was launched by the mayor, who announced his support of a more bicycle-friendly Omaha. A supply of 5000 copies of the Bicycle Transportation Map was completely exhausted in 1 month through distribution within local bike shops, bike clubs, and public libraries.

The Safe Routes to School initiative was introduced to encourage walking to school in large groups with parent champions. The impetus for this program began when Mark Fenton, a national walking expert, came to Omaha in 2006 to demonstrate a walk audit at a local school, which attracted community stakeholders. In 2007–2008, Activate Omaha invited additional schools to implement the Safe Routes to School philosophy.

Activate Omaha and partners developed the Keystone Gateway to Active Living in 2007. This program attracted businesses along the local Keystone Trail to collaborate in a program that featured a shared community resource. Grant funds purchased

bikes and helmets, which gave underserved youth an opportunity to engage in physical activity by riding on the local trail; learn about healthy eating; and become advocates of active living by conducting trail audits. For some youth, this was their first time on a trail. At the end of each summer, select youth advocated for trails in their neighborhoods through presentations to the Douglas County Board of Health and Papio Natural Resources District.

Policy. As the initiative built its credibility through promotions and programs, it was in an optimum position to leverage physical landscape and policy change.

Omaha's infrastructure is predominately automobile built. The initiative focused on changing this "automobile only" philosophy to a "Complete Streets" plan. Simple priorities (e.g., striping bike lanes on workable streets) can lead to long-term construction projects (e.g., lane diets). The completion of the Bicycle Transportation Map and the leveraging of private funding led the initiative to confidently approach the mayor's office with a proposal to appoint the first Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee. In 2008, the mayor's office accepted the proposal, and community residents were appointed. City staff members, including directors of planning and public works, were mandated to attend. The committee serves to advise city planning on physical projects as they relate to bicycle and pedestrian access issues. This inevitably changes the face and philosophy of Omaha as these facilities are incorporated into the city/county transportation master plans. The formation of the committee was the first step in assuring this work would be done.

Physical projects. Omaha by Design had built the foundation for physical projects by creating several policy changes within the City of Omaha from 2004 to 2007. Subsequently, Activate Omaha began to work in tandem with Omaha by Design in 2007, focusing its efforts on implementing those policies. The initiative submitted proposals and secured over \$700,000 through private foundations to implement physical projects. Matching funds were allocated and a number of physical projects were approved. Currently, 20 miles of on-street bicycle facilities (e.g., bike lanes, bike boulevards, signage, and trail expansion) are in the conceptual design phases owing to the generous giving of these foundations.

Additionally, over \$250,000 in federal transportation enhancement funds will result in lane diets, bicycle lanes, and

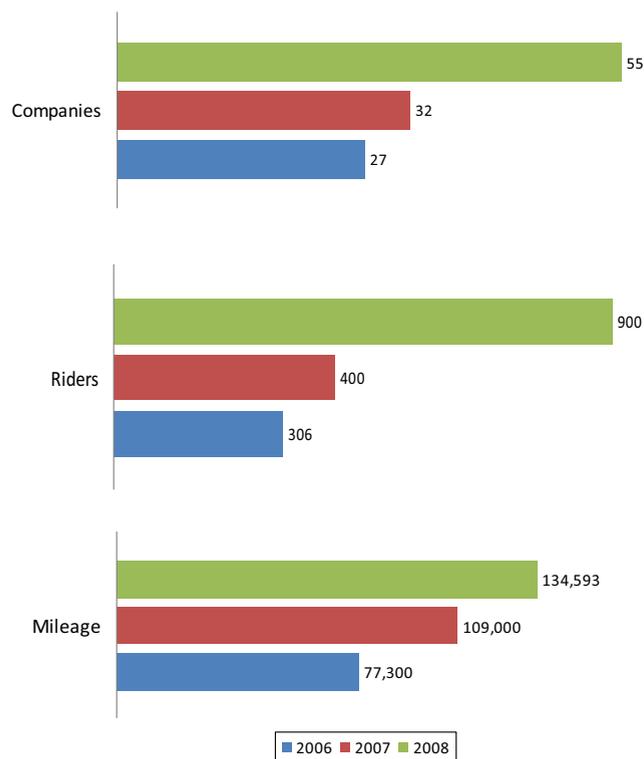


Figure 3. Bicycle commuter challenge growth

additional bike/pedestrian facilities on an Omaha arterial. Owing to the initiative's work, the city planning and public works departments have agreed to allocate an additional 10 feet of right-of-way on all road-widening projects, where available.

Results

Over the course of the ALbD grant, numerous outcomes were measured, including the community's change in perception of the importance of an active community; the behavior change as a result of this perception shift; the actual physical change to the Omaha environment; and the increase in social capital leveraging additional funding.

In order to raise awareness and change community perception, three successful media campaigns were launched. Effectiveness of each media campaign was determined by surveys conducted through the MSR Group. The survey objectives were to: (1) measure participants' opinions about activity and lifestyles; (2) assess impressions of Omaha as a place to lead an active lifestyle; (3) evaluate perceived opportunities and plans to be more active; (4) assess awareness and effect of the Activate Omaha campaign to date; and (5) measure changes in these indicators. Each survey was conducted via telephone using a random calling methodology. A total of 250 interviews were completed with respondents answering an average of 28 questions. All respondents lived in Douglas County, were aged between 25 and 54 years, and were heads of household.

In 2008, a total of 78% of respondents reported their impression of Omaha as a community in which to be active and of leading an active lifestyle as "good" or "very good," a rating higher than the 63% reported in 2005. As a result of the perception shift, behavior changes were seen when 79% of respondents reported having explored parts of Omaha on foot in 2008. This number was 11 percentage points higher than the 68% that reported exploring Omaha by foot in 2005. These surveys provided evidence that community perceptions of Omaha were improving, and residents were noticing that active-living opportunities were accessible.

As the initiative raised awareness through social-marketing campaigns, it implemented complementary programming. Portions of each of the media and social-marketing campaigns, as well as parallel programming, showed increases in the number of recipients and participants, illustrated in Table 2.

In 2008, the Bicycle Commuter Challenge showed a 200% increase in participation of those who rode a bike and a 76% increase in miles cycled from 2006. Participating companies reported soft policy changes such as installing bicycle parking, providing incentives for biking to work, and providing other needed amenities, illustrated in Figure 3.

Safe Routes to School initiatives were implemented in three schools. The Fenton Walk Audit assisted one school with producing action steps, leading to a grant application to the State of Nebraska. The State of Nebraska Department of Transportation funded this local school \$127,000 to implement both infrastructure and non-infrastructure changes.

In 2007, with assistance from Activate Omaha, a second school received state funding to implement a non-infrastructure program. A new partnership was formed with the local Public Works Department that increased awareness of safety issues surrounding the school. The Public Works Department included many of the infrastructure changes in their 2008 budget. Activate Omaha currently acts as a Safe Routes resource to two additional schools that received federal funding to implement infrastructure/non-infrastructure changes within the school and the surrounding neighborhood.

Because of the initiative's successful promotional efforts, sustainable programming, sound partnership, and collaborative policy work, other organizations see Activate Omaha as a resourceful mentor. In 2006, one of Omaha's leading health systems invited community stakeholders to discuss childhood obesity. Activate Omaha served as a co-sponsor and facilitator of this new partnership, which grew to be Activate Omaha Kids. Similarly, several prestigious Omaha CEOs began meeting regularly with the mission of making Omaha one of the healthiest cities in the nation by 2020. Again, Activate Omaha was called upon as a model initiative and asked to support and guide the new collaboration.

Table 2. Growth of Activate Omaha's 5Ps

5Ps	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Preparation					
● Leadership team	5 members	7 members	9 members	12 members	15 members
● Fundraising	\$77,000	\$110,000	\$209,000	\$241,000	\$835,000
Promotions (# of participants)					
● Sprint Through the Holidays	100 individuals	175 individuals	230 individuals	310 individuals	350 individuals
● Caught in the Act		200 companies	210 companies	250 companies	250 companies
● Worksite Toolkits			600 citizens	1100 citizens	
Programs	—			100 companies	150 companies
● Bicycle Commuter Challenge			300 riders	410 riders	900 riders
● Safe Routes to School		2 schools	3 schools	5 schools	15 schools
● Keystone Gateway to Active Living				100 youth	125 youth
Policy					
● Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee	—	—	—	—	Institutionalized within city
● Balanced Transportation Manager					Institutionalized within city
Physical projects					
● SRTS infrastructure	—	—	Rumsey Elementary	McMillan Middle	WestBrook Elementary
● Bicycle facilities				20 Mile Loop	

5Ps, Preparation, Promotions, Programs, Policy, Physical projects; SRTS, Safe Routes to School

Being invited to act as a primary convener for these high-level community groups was the ultimate vote of confidence for Activate Omaha.

By building on the 5P model, the initiative earned community-wide credibility that increased the initiative's sphere of influence. The initiative's many successes are evidence that the 5P model is effective. As a result, throughout the 5 years of the ALbD grant period, the initiative successfully leveraged \$1,475,000 in additional funding to implement media campaigns and sustainable programming.

Specifically as a result of the successful Keystone Gateway program, private funders approached Activate Omaha inquiring how to get involved in co-creating a multi-modal transportation facility. These funders recognized the initiative as the entity advocating for active living in the Omaha area and offered their financial support for a physical project that would make Omaha more walkable and bikeable. Currently, 20 miles of on-street bicycle facilities are in the conceptual design phase, with the first physical projects to be completed by 2010.

Finally, due to the formation of the Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee, a contract is being signed between one of Omaha's leading health systems and the City of Omaha to fund a Balanced Transportation Manager housed at the city staff offices. Activate Omaha was instrumental in this process, acting as the convener.

Discussion

Activate Omaha built its credibility through its broad-based partnership, consistent message, market niche,

and data-driven approach. These attributes grew out of Activate Omaha's reliance and commitment to the 5P model. Activate Omaha intentionally began with preparation and promotion, moved to leveraging resources for programming, and finally to physical projects and policy change. This sequence allowed the initiative to develop a credible voice, resulting in Activate Omaha becoming a reputable partner, capable of achieving outcomes.

In its early years, the initiative utilized traditional marketing and unique social marketing as its key components. Building on the brand recognition achieved, the initiative added innovative programming to its foundation. Examples included the Bicycle Commuter Challenge, the Keystone Gateway to Active Living, and Safe Routes to School programming. By the end of the ALbD grant cycle, Activate Omaha's emphasis moved to policy and infrastructure change. Examples include the 20-mile bicycle loop, Safe Routes to School infrastructure changes, and the first Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee. Policy change could not have happened without developing the initiative through action.

Lessons Learned

Perhaps most critical to the initiative's success is a strong evaluation component within each of the 5Ps. Evaluation results not only prove the benefit of each effort but help to direct the partnership to the next level. Results from social marketing demonstrated that the campaigns and programs had to embrace

elements that either helped families assure physical activity for their children or allowed individuals to participate in activities that enhanced the image of Omaha as an active community. The evaluations from the Keystone Gateway and the Bicycle Commuter Challenge clearly demonstrated that built-environment changes were essential, with many lower-income communities lacking trail access. The results from the evaluation showed increases in physical activity levels among other key outcomes. Evaluation data were essential not only in driving the initiative's annual strategic plans, but also essential in leveraging funding from local philanthropic organizations. At the end of the ALbD grant, additional funding was easily leveraged owing to Activate Omaha's successes and fiscal responsibility.

Second, the development of strong partnerships has been the backbone of Activate Omaha's success. The initiative's committed partners create resources, improve problem solving by expanding perspective, and form critical mass for credibility and support. Partnership development requires that each partner has the opportunity to participate from planning through implementation to evaluation, based on interest and skill set. Over the course of the grant, the initiative learned to strategically engage partners only when relevant to both partner and organization. For example, during the 2005 kickoff, the initiative engaged any and all partners that would participate. The event was a disaster owing to poor timing and lack of organization. Partners disengaged immediately. Consequently, the credibility of the initiative was lost, and partnerships had to be carefully rebuilt for future efforts. The lesson learned was that by building on each success and listening to community responses, a stable sustainable influence can emerge that enhances partnerships and demands respect.

Conclusion

Activate Omaha has become a credible organization, positioned to make sustainable change as a result of following the 5P model in a sensible way for the community. This approach has ultimately led to lasting change in the landscape of the community and the behavior of its citizens.

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