

Activate Omaha

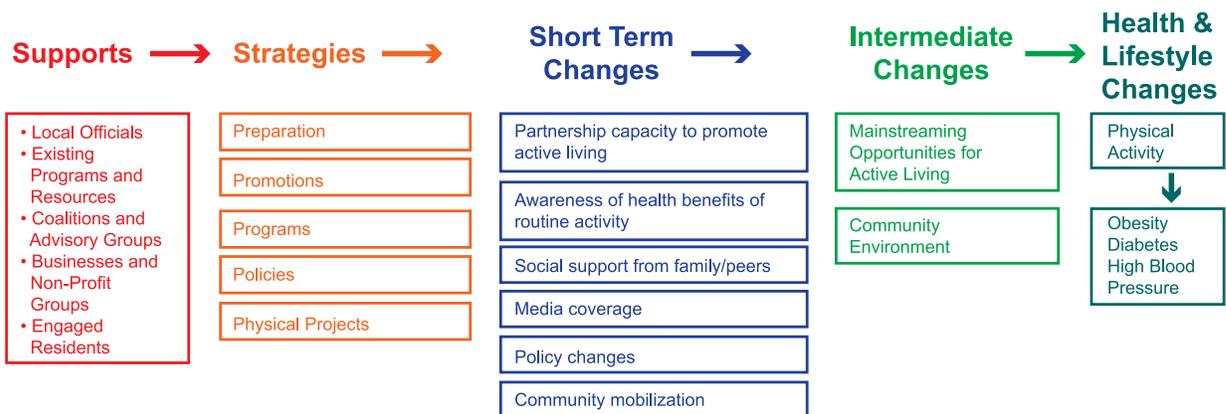
Evaluation of Active Living by Design | Omaha, Nebraska | 2003-2008

On a breezy summer day in Omaha, Nebraska, walkers, runners, and cyclists who made their way through a local park found their journey interrupted by a group rewarding residents for being “caught in the act” of being physically active. The “Caught in the Act” campaign was spearheaded by a local partnership that aimed to increase physical activity among residents, especially through active living.

“Active living” is a way of life that integrates physical activity into daily routines in order to accumulate at least 30 minutes of activity each day. In November 2003, Our Healthy Community Partnership, a healthy communities organization, received a five-year, \$200,000 grant as part of the Active Living by Design national program (www.activelivingbydesign.org) funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. By advocating for changes in community design, specifically land use, transportation, parks, trails, and greenways, the Active Living by Design initiative intended to make it easier for people to be active in their daily routines.¹

The Active Living by Design Community Action Model provided five active living strategies to influence community change: Preparation, Promotions, Programs, Policies, and Physical Projects. The 5Ps represent a comprehensive approach to increasing physical activity through short-term, intermediate, and long-term community changes. While the partnership focused primarily on promotional efforts, this inclusive model facilitated the integration of policy, physical project, and programmatic efforts.

Active Living by Design Community Action Model



Omaha, Nebraska, has seen a number of challenges for increasing accessibility and availability of active living opportunities. Despite these challenges, several initiatives have formed over the past few decades to address health, active living, and other related aspects of the community. Through the leadership of Our Healthy Community Partnership and its ties in the community, Activate Omaha engaged organizations, community leaders, and businesses in efforts to improve active living throughout Omaha. The Active Living by Design (ALbD) initiative provided an opportunity for a leader to emerge that could create synergy among these various organizations to make a larger impact on the health of Omaha citizens.

¹ The Active Living by Design (ALbD) initiative was established by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) in 2001, and its National Program Office (NPO) is part of the University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Twenty-five interdisciplinary community partnerships were selected across the country to demonstrate how changing community design can impact physical activity. Transtria was funded by RWJF to work with the NPO to conduct ALbD evaluation and dissemination activities. This case report draws from Transtria’s evaluation efforts.

Omaha, Nebraska

Omaha is the largest city in Nebraska with approximately 460,000 residents, representing over a quarter of the state's population. The city is primarily white (81%) with small racial and ethnic populations (11% African American, 7% Hispanic/Latino). Omaha neighborhoods tend to be defined by race/ethnicity and income. Omaha has a relatively young population with 27% of residents less than 18 years old and 31% between 25 and 44 years old. Omaha also has one of the highest percentages of working mothers in the nation, resulting in a large number of children in full-time daycare. Eight-five percent of residents have an education level of a high school diploma or greater, and 14% live below the poverty level.

Major barriers to active living in Omaha included automobile-centric culture and infrastructure. Omaha residents tended to view motor vehicles as the only viable transportation option. For example, many parents drove their children to school even when they lived near enough to walk or bike. Policy- and decision-makers appeared to share this belief as planning for rapid growth in recent years did not include alternative transportation options. Existing public transportation tended to be limited and underdeveloped. Residents who used public transportation often did so out of necessity, and many complained about the hassle.

“The people who are going to use public transportation literally have no other choice. It’s not like, ‘Well, I just want to save money on gas,’ or ‘I want to be environmentally-friendly, so I am going to take the bus.’ It’s just too much of a hassle even if I wanted to. So, people who use it absolutely don’t have any other choice.” -Community Member

“It’s easier and more convenient to get in your car and go than it is to wait for a bus.” -Community Member

A 2004 health report card released by Our Healthy Community Partnership stated that six of ten adults in Douglas County were obese or overweight and a majority of residents did not meet the recommendations for weekly physical activity. Based on evidence that demonstrated the looming obesity epidemic in Omaha, Activate Omaha set out to increase the community's capacity to mobilize around and address different public issues by facilitating communication among key community groups and individuals.

Preparation

Partnership



In response to the ALbD grant, Our Healthy Community Partnership established Activate Omaha, a partnership committed to increasing physical activity in Omaha. Existing Our Healthy Community Partnership members actively supported Activate Omaha by joining the new partnership and recruiting additional members through their own networks. For example, the Wellness Council of the Midlands and the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce were essential in reaching out to the business community. Activate Omaha identified potential partners by their ability to reach a particular target audience or the skills and expertise they could contribute to the partnership's efforts.

“So, we really worked with [Wellness Council of the Midlands] to make that connection [with employee wellness coordinators] and sort of get our information out. That was a natural tie-in. And, then we also went through the Omaha Chamber of Commerce to also hit those business that are not a part of [Wellness Council of the Midlands], to at least get the word out.” -Staff

For most of the ALbD grant, the partnership conducted formal, quarterly meetings. In the fourth year of the grant, members selected to meet less frequently and center meetings on educational speakers. This shift in planning helped to maintain partner engagement.

“I think a lot of times people have the notion in their head that you have to have partnership meetings monthly in order for it to be successful. And, we really have found that that is not the case. We don’t ever want to have meetings just to have meetings. We want them to be useful.” -Staff

Partners made an effort to be supportive of one another in order to yield a productive and enjoyable working environment. Partners valued Activate Omaha’s efforts and actively participated in partnership activities. When activities resulted in tangible change, partners were inspired to continue their participation and support. In addition, the partnership strove to reduce duplication of efforts. For example, one partner, Omaha by Design focused on policy and physical projects led Activate Omaha to center most of its efforts on partnership building and promotions.

“I mean we have a diverse partnership. And, what is great about them is that they all...they come to every meeting. They’re very active. And, they are excited about what we are doing and helping out. You know, it is all volunteer. So again, that is great for me. I like to have that added support and so they are all there willing to pitch in. And, it is a diverse group so we can kind of tap into those areas that we might not have been able to, had they not been sitting around the table.” -Staff

“I think it’s been a great group of people. The people are...I mean it’s fun. What a drag when you go to a meeting and everybody sits like this and, you know, who wants to be part of that. But, I think we have got good solid folks that are enjoying what they do. And, that portrays itself when they go work with other people and everybody wants to jump on that bandwagon of people that are doing great things.” -Partner

An Executive Leadership Committee convened monthly to discuss programming and strategic planning in order to guide the activities of the partnership. Members represented local businesses, health-focused organizations, and community planning/urban design.

“I think one of the exciting things that looks like it is going to happen with the [Executive Leadership Committee] is that a lot of non-profits aren’t equipped either by lack of time or resources to really figure out how to get into public policy issues. So, I think there is great potential from having people identify issues and then working together and kind of pulling resources as opposed to every little non-profit going out there trying to reinvent the wheel... So, I think we are kind of starting down that road. That will be exciting to see.” -Partner

Activate Omaha also organized a number of sub-committees to encourage use of the 5P model. These committees included media, Safe Routes to School, policy, and fundraising. This structure allowed the Activate Omaha to engage members according to their particular expertise, skills, or resources, resulting in a more effective and efficient partnership. In the third year of the grant, a group of local organizations expressed an interest in forming a bicycle-friendly community design coalition. The coalition, Bikeable Communities!, formed under the umbrella of Activate Omaha but maintained a separate mission and vision.

Partners, staff, and community members identified several beneficial characteristics of the Activate Omaha partnership:

- Activate Omaha leaders strategically utilized partner’s skills and resources in order to maximize benefit and allow for meaningful engagement.
- The partnership represented a diversity of disciplines, both traditional (e.g., health-oriented) and non-traditional (e.g., transportation, planning) partners, which created a rich resource pool, improved problem-solving, and introduced fresh perspectives.
- The large and diverse partnership formed a critical mass that increased credibility and support from the broader community.

“But, traditionally, there hasn’t been a real strong connection between like your engineering community and the health community. And, I think that is...where Activate Omaha is...helping in that...bringing the two sides together.”
-Partner

“That’s the fun thing about this project. There are audiences in the whole city of Omaha. It is such a big, vast range of different things. People coming out and bringing new perspectives.” -Staff

“I think that if we had to do it again we’d probably do it a little bit more strategically in the beginning. As a result we’ve done that now and that’s how we have such great partner engagement because we’re engaging them in areas that matter to them other than just a blanket invitation and lots of meetings. We try to be incredibly respectful of the time of our partners and utilize them when we need to utilize them.” -Staff

Partners, staff, and community members also noted a challenge to creating and maintaining the Activate Omaha partnership, in that it found it difficult to maintain some partners’ long-term interest.

The table below lists the partners involved in the Activate Omaha partnership.

Members of the Activate Omaha Partnership	
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Nebraska • Douglas County Health Department • Government Council on Physical Fitness and Sports • Health Systems (Alegent, Immanuel, Methodist, Nebraska) • Hope Med Outreach Coalition • Metro Omaha Medical Society • Nebraska Association of Health, Physical Education & Recreation • Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services • Our Healthy Community Partnership (later known as Live Well Omaha)* • Sarpy Cass County Health & Wellness Department • University of Nebraska Medical Center • Wellness Council of the Midlands
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creighton University • Metropolitan Community College • Omaha Public Schools • University of Nebraska at Omaha • Westside District 66 Schools
Parks & Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City of Omaha Parks and Recreation Department • National Park Service, Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance • Papio Missouri River Natural Resources District • YMCA

Members of the Activate Omaha Partnership (continued)

Urban Design, Planning & Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Institute of Architects • City of Omaha Planning Department • Felsburg Holt & Ullevig • HDR Community Planning and Urban Design Group • Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities • Mass Transit Association • Metro Area Planning Agency • Metro Area Transit • Omaha by Design • RDG Planning and Design
Community Leaders, Policy- & Decision-makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City of Omaha <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - City Council - Mayor's Office
Other Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City of Omaha Public Works Department • Douglas County Treasurer's Office • Offut Air Force Base • Omaha Public Library
Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bikeable Communities! (later renamed OmahaBikes) • Keep Kids Alive Drive 25 • Keep Omaha Beautiful • Sierra Club Missouri Valley
Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bike Masters • Bike Rack • First National Bank • Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce • HighGear • Mutual of Omaha • Peak Performance • Rockbrook Women's Gym • The Bike Way • Trek Bicycle Store • Union Pacific Railroad • Whole Foods • Wild Oats Marketplace
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EMspace Group • Carroll Communications • Omaha Sports Source
Community & Faith-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campfire USA • City Sprouts Gardening Organization • Club Possible • Destination Midtown • Girls, Inc.

*Organization that served as lead agency during the ALBD grant period

Leadership

Our Health Community Partnership worked to improve the health and economic vitality in the Omaha area by convening community partners to identify community assets, prioritize health issues, and develop solutions that rely on the assets of the community. As lead agency, Our Healthy Community Partnership provided the Activate Omaha partnership with financial support, a network of existing partners, and a solid foundation in the community. Throughout the grant period, Activate Omaha was able to build upon Our Healthy Community Partnership's working ties with local companies and business leaders to expand the Activate Omaha partnership and leverage resources to support active living efforts.

"I haven't seen any downside to [Our Healthy Community Partnership] being the leader to this. We are all specialists, and we are all off to find our own niche. And having more of a general umbrella out there to pull us all together is just, as [a partner] said, 'It's just natural.'" -Staff

The Executive Director of Our Healthy Community Partnership served as the Project Director of Activate Omaha. She played a large role in initiating the partnership and submitting the ALbD grant proposal. As the organization evolved over the five-year grant period, she oversaw the operations of Activate Omaha. Throughout her years as Project Director, she was instrumental in engaging new partners and maintaining the energy surrounding Activate Omaha.

The ALbD grant was used to hire a full-time Project Coordinator to assist with the day-to-day management of the partnership and its activities. The Project Coordinator's main responsibilities included creating visibility for Activate Omaha, coordinating and participating in meetings, and working with partners to ensure the completion of partnership tasks. After difficulty identifying a good candidate for the position, a third and final Project Coordinator was hired in the second year of the ALbD grant.

Partners described the Project Director and Project Coordinator as having great listening skills, consistent follow-through, positive energy, and strong leadership.

"I mean it's like we have an all-star team. [The Project Director and Project Coordinator's] energy and their follow-through and their listening skills and all the things that you want from people leading organizations." -Partner

"I think Activate Omaha has been tremendous. And, it has gotten better and better. And, [the Project Coordinator] has done a phenomenal job. I mean she has come on and injected energy into this which was needed." -Partner

An Interim Project Coordinator was hired when the regular Project Coordinator needed to take a leave of absence. When she returned, the Interim was asked to transition into a part-time position in which she was able to assist with writing newsletters, designing promotional items, and attending community events.

Additional staff included an intern who was hired in the second year of the grant to gather research, conduct interviews, and develop materials.

Funding and Resources

Activate Omaha reached out to a number of local, state, and national funding sources to expand the resources available to support its active living efforts. They assisted schools in obtaining state funding to implement programming. Over \$1,475,000 in financial and in-kind support came from the following sources:

- Alegent Community Benefit Trust
- American Heart Association
- Amy L. Scott Foundation
- Anonymous Private Foundation
- Area Health Education Center
- Blue Cross Blue Shield of Nebraska
- National Park Service
- Papio Natural Resource District
- Peter Kiewit Foundation
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- Sarpy/Cass County Health Department
- State of Nebraska Health and Human Services
- State of Nebraska Department of Transportation
- Wild Oats Marketplace

Community Supports and Challenges

Omaha's built environment provided many challenges to and opportunities for active living. Omaha experienced rapid westward growth in recent decades. Unfortunately, the city was unable or unwilling to build and expand certain types of infrastructure (e.g., public transportation, walkability, bikeability) at the same rate that it was growing.

Many neighborhoods, both new and old, lacked sidewalks. Bike trails had only recently been constructed. Although there were over 60 miles of recreational trails in Omaha, they were not well-connected. Other factors that limited active living behaviors included traffic conditions, aggressive drivers, absence of east-west trails, poor street design, lack of bike lanes, hilly terrain, and harsh winters (e.g., snow, ice, sleet). Because of these factors, few residents engaged in active living, specifically bicycling. Most bicycle trips in Omaha were recreational only. Transportation-related trips were rare.

“Omaha is certainly... it is not hostile to bicycling. It just does not acknowledge in general that they exist. Bike commuters and casual riders find that... not all streets are bicycle-friendly. So, we are trying to change that. We have hills. That makes it a little bit more difficult to get a larger bicycling population. And, we also have ice, snow, and sleet.” -Partner

“We have a great recreational trails system. It runs north to south along with our creeks and our waterways. We don't have anything that's running east-west... [Commuting by bike] is almost like an extreme sport because we don't have any protected bike lanes.” -Staff

To address these barriers to active living, there have been efforts to revitalize, specifically in Downtown Omaha. Some key aspects of the redevelopment have included multi-modal transportation, mixed-use developments, and construction of public destinations (e.g., Qwest Center). However, business owners' and residents' perceptions of crime has created some challenges for progress in the downtown area. For example, some residents have been hesitant to relocate.

“I would think they are going to have to work on the crime and gang task forces and stuff first before you are going to be able to rebuild some of that area for sure.” -Community Member

Overall, Activate Omaha staff and partners felt that they received positive support for their activities. Throughout the grant period, support was demonstrated at a variety of levels. Businesses minimized barriers to biking to work. Schools invited Activate Omaha to conduct walking audits. Community residents embraced ways to build community pride, safety, and security. Media outlets shared Activate Omaha's message.

"I think you hear people talking about [active living] more. I think I have heard businesses trying to at least make [biking to work] more...a little bit easier for [employees]. Once they get to work, to have a little bit more time to get cleaned up and do those kinds of things." -Community Member

"In the workshops that [a partner] does with the neighborhoods, those are the things that come up every, all the time. They don't come up in the context of active living necessarily; they come up in the context of 'We want a place we are proud to live and where our kids can spend time and we are safe and all those things.'" -Partner

Although there was a large amount of public support for Activate Omaha, it did not necessarily equate to a change in attitudes toward active living among community members, something the partnership found challenging. Residents perceived crime rates to be high across the city, although the highest crime rates tended to not be in the areas targeted by the partnership.

Several large employers, including Fortune 500 companies, as well as many small businesses have called Omaha home. Community change has often been driven by the interests and priorities of business leaders. Activate Omaha capitalized on existing partnerships to reach out to the business community and cultivate buy-in from business leaders. The partnership was able to leverage funding from private dollars through the philanthropy of these organizations.

"Omaha is a community that is run by the CEOs. And, if you get interested CEOs and government officials at the right level, it happens. But, without that, it does not happen. So, if a CEO identifies this as their pet project, it would move but without that identification, it may not." -Partner

"Omaha is very business-driven... Business leaders are very influential in what happens. It is very philanthropic and a lot of wealth, a lot of large, large wealth, which is good for us. Good for the city actually in that they are interested in this type of thing. Most of what happens comes from private dollars." -Staff

Local leaders were willing to lend their support to Activate Omaha because of its desirable message. Partners identified policy- and decision-maker support as a vital component to implementing successful initiatives.

"I think it is kind of exciting for them to see this positive group that is actually making changes. And, they want to be part of that, even by the Treasurer's office. Politicians in town want to be a part of that. It's the right message." -Partner

To influence policy- and decision-makers, Activate Omaha invited them to participate in different partnership-sponsored events. For instance, the partnership invited several key players from Omaha to participate in a trip to Boulder, Colorado, to learn more about successful alternative public transit systems. This trip led to improved relationships and increased participation by policy- and decision-makers in active living efforts. One individual who visited Boulder later became Mayor of Omaha and made a declaration that all streets in Omaha be considered for complete streets design enhancements.

We are building those relationships. Last fall we took a group of individuals to Boulder, Colorado... They have a program set up where groups like us can bring people in and they share where they were before and where they are now and what that process was like. And, so it was really great for us. It was city council members, public works, parks and rec, someone who might be our future mayor...we invited those players to go with us. Now we have those relationships where they are coming up to me letting me know they want to be involved." -Staff

Likewise, the Mayor of Omaha served as a proponent for the active living initiative in Omaha by leading several events and issuing proclamations. On a personal level, his belief in the Activate Omaha message has led to a healthier and more physically active lifestyle.

“The mayor is totally onboard with [the Activate Omaha] message and has really taken that personally and has lost all this weight and is cycling. It’s just fantastic. He could not say enough good things about Activate Omaha.” -Partner

Community Assessment

The success of the projects of Activate Omaha was facilitated by community involvement in assessment activities. Community members participated in a number of charrettes and surveys in order to help identify community supports and barriers to physical activity.

One of the tasks of the policy subcommittee of Activate Omaha was to design a survey to assess the physical environment in neighborhoods across the city. Partners also held a number of community charrettes in the Benson, Joselyn Castle, and Old Loveland neighborhoods and provided resources to these communities to begin making changes.

“We did some neighborhood assessments along with that, but we haven’t really moved into policy change or things like that. But, just having those conversations is what matters.” -Staff

Several walking audits were conducted throughout the community with the assistance of Mark Fenton, a national expert in walkability. A community-wide audit helped to build political support for creating infrastructure change that supports active living by inviting government officials to participate in the audit. A number of audits were also performed near local elementary schools to identify ways to increase safety for children who walk or bike to school and to prioritize issues based on support and funding.

Throughout the grant period, Activate Omaha used surveys and other types of assessments to understand if ALbD activities changed opinions, perceptions, behaviors, social capital and the environment and how the efforts would be improved. For example, partners conducted telephone surveys with community members who were exposed to the Activate Omaha social marketing campaigns to measure participants’ opinions about physical activity and lifestyles, impressions of Omaha as a place to lead an active lifestyle, perceived opportunities and plans to be more active, and awareness and effect of the Activate Omaha campaign to-date. Positive results indicated that the Activate Omaha partnership had impacted community members’ perceptions of Omaha as a supportive environment for active living as well as their willingness to explore Omaha on foot.

Policies and Physical Projects

Throughout the grant, Activate Omaha’s program, promotion, and partnership-building efforts built credibility for the active living movement and generated support for infrastructure and policy change. Activate Omaha used programs and promotions to build community demand and establish rapport with community members in order to influence policy change. The partnership provided resources and information to community members about how to become well-informed citizens and advocates for change, often through existing programs.

At the same time, partner Omaha by Design worked with the city to develop a number of policies supportive of active living. Near the end of the ALbD grant, Activate Omaha and Omaha by Design began to work together closely on the implementation of active living policies. Throughout the grant period, Activate Omaha sought small- and large-scale environmental changes. Policies and physical projects, related partner, staff, and community implementation activities, and associated outcomes are described as follows.

Bicycle/Pedestrian Advisory Committee

- In the final year of the ALBD grant, Activate Omaha approached the mayor's office with a proposal to create a technical advisory group to advise the mayor on improving conditions for bicycling, walking, and other forms of alternative transportation. The Balanced Transportation Advisory Committee was approved.
- Members represented a variety of professional fields and disciplines, including architecture, engineering, development, lease management, land-use law, and public art commission. Community residents also participated.

Land Use and Street Design Policy

- In the fourth year of the grant, the City Council unanimously passed a package of revisions and additions to the city's zoning and subdivision code structure for streetscapes, signage, landscaping, building design, pedestrian networks, public spaces, and connections between city neighborhoods, commercial centers, and civic districts.
- The partnership supported this effort by providing information and encouraging residents to write letters and attend meetings.

Bicycle/Pedestrian Loop

- The partnership received funding to develop a 19-mile Bicycle/Pedestrian Loop in Omaha as a pilot project to increase physical activity. The partnership hoped the success of the pilot project would encourage the funder and the city to invest additional resources in expanding the loop and would serve as the groundwork for a city-wide transportation master plan.

Bike Amenities

- Through programmatic and promotional efforts, Activate Omaha increased community demand for bicycle lanes and other amenities.
 - The partnership identified streets that needed to be redesigned and requested that bike lane signage and striping be incorporated. The partnership targeted streets that could easily accommodate bike lanes.
- 
- By the end of the grant period, over 20 miles of on-street enhancements were in design phases, due to funding provided by a number of private foundations. Federal transportation enhancement funds were also secured for road diets (i.e., a reduction in traffic lanes), bicycle lanes, and other amenities.
 - The city planning and public works departments agreed to allocate an additional ten feet of right-of-way on all road-widening projects.
 - In collaboration with local bicycle shops, Activate Omaha offered inexpensive bicycle racks to businesses throughout the city.
 - Bike racks were added to all Metro Area Transit (MAT) buses and trains.

“I am looking at some low-hanging fruit in terms of bike lanes, trying to find streets that perhaps need to be redesigned anyway. All you do is change your painting on them. Paint and signage to maybe convert a four-lane street to a three-lane street that there is the same amount of traffic to it so that bike lanes could be inserted. So those are some of the things that doesn't impact the budget.” -Partner

► **Other Policies and Physical Projects**

- The partnership served on the steering committee for BenchMarks, a public art beautification project, in the second year of the grant. One hundred bus benches were painted by local artists. A maintenance fund was established for the painted benches and other public art.
- In response to an increase in employees commuting to work by bike because of the Bicycle Commuter Challenge, many businesses began to implement policy and physical projects to create a more supportive environment for commuters. Examples included installation of bike parking and incentives for employees who biked to work.
- One elementary school used walk audit results to obtain a grant from the Nebraska Department of Transportation to implement infrastructure changes as part of Safe Routes to School. Activate Omaha served as a technical assistance partner to schools that received funding.
- A partnership formed with the local Public Works Department increased awareness of safety issues around schools and encouraged the Public Works Department to include many infrastructure changes around schools in its yearly budget.
- In Spring 2008, the lead agency hired a part-time Safe Routes to School coordinator.



Challenges

Staff, partners, and communities members noted a number of challenges to developing and implementing policies and physical projects:

- Developers were resistant to using new designs that accommodated multi-modal users.
- Engineers and public works officials were hesitant to incorporate pedestrian- and bicyclist-friendly designs into their initial planning process and preferred to address these issues after construction or development was completed, despite the obvious cost savings to the city.
- The partnership found it challenging to encourage parents to allow their children to walk to school because of safety fears and the perception that walking to school was not feasible.

“If [decision-makers] look at [active living amenities] when they are planning [projects], it is a lot easier to accommodate [bicycle and pedestrian amenities] rather than having to go back in and re-fit.” -Partner

“I am trying to push the city along to maybe embrace a bit more pedestrian-friendly design and try to add in some elements that they haven’t necessarily used in the past. It is kind of a challenge in that they haven’t done that before. They are not necessarily wanting to go ahead full force with it.” -Partner

“I think as far as Safe Routes to School, the challenge there has been getting parents to realize the importance of it and to realize that it is doable.” -Staff

Despite these challenges, Activate Omaha partners hoped to take advantage of federal legislation that encouraged multi-modal transportation and infrastructure changes and Nebraska’s emerging interest in alternative modes of transportation.

Programs and Promotions

Promotions were identified by Activate Omaha staff and partners as the strongest aspect of their ALbD project. Much of their initial efforts were focused on creating and establishing a brand for the partnership. Partners also developed several low-cost, sustainable programs to provide opportunities for physical activity for Omaha residents, specifically underserved populations. Programmatic and promotional efforts, related partner, staff, and community implementation activities, and associated outcomes are described as follows.

▶ **Activate Omaha Marketing and Branding**

- In the first years of the ALbD grant, Activate Omaha focused on building its identity and brand as the “go-to” organization for active living resources and information.
- A professional communication design firm worked pro bono to develop a logo and communications brand.
- To promote awareness of the partnership, Activate Omaha created messaging for various communication channels (e.g., print, radio, television), developed targeted messages for different population segments, and maintained a single brand to represent the initiative.
- Promotional materials that could be easily associated with Activate Omaha included stickers, sunscreen packets, t-shirts, and drink holders.

“Activate Omaha has done such a great job with visibility and people knowing who they are and what they do, that when something happens like the childhood obesity issue and those kinds of things, it’s like Activate Omaha has to be a part of this instead of being buried somewhere and people don’t know about you or what you do. And, I think that goes back to that whole original plan of media awareness and then having a great person to follow through with everything. They are now known. They are part of the groups that they need to be part of.” -Partner

▶ **Social Marketing and Media Campaigns**

- The partnership’s most visible efforts were yearly social marketing campaigns. The partners utilized formative and outcome evaluation to shape the messages and monitor the effect of the campaigns on residents. MSR Group, a market research group, was sub-contracted with to conduct a post-campaign evaluation, with funding from Alegent, who paid for the most of the social marketing effort for multiple years.
- A focus group with local exercise and health promotion experts led to the creation of three themes to encourage physical activity: physical activity is part of everyday living, physical activity can occur anywhere anytime, and physical activity is fun.
- Omaha’s first media campaign took place in the second year of the ALbD grant. The first 8-week campaign promoted active living messages through 142 radio spots, 26 print advertisements, and 11 billboards. To kick off the campaign, a Moving Day walking event was led by the mayor, president of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and CEO from BlueCross BlueShield and Alegent Health System. Three-hundred people participated.
- The second iteration was a 12-week campaign based on research that showed residents wanted to be part of a more active community and were interested in activities that involved the entire family. The campaign encouraged children and families find new ways to be active together. The campaign kick-off event took place at the Summer Sprint, which included family-friendly activities (e.g., walking, stair climbing, jump rope, martial arts) and prizes. The campaign also introduced Caught in the Act, which rewarded community members with incentives when they were caught being active.

- Based on post-campaign research, Activate Omaha’s third effort focused on target social marketing rather than mass media. This campaign focused on families, worksites, and communities. The campaign was kicked off by a Community in Action photography series, which featured local photographers’ images of residents being active in the community.



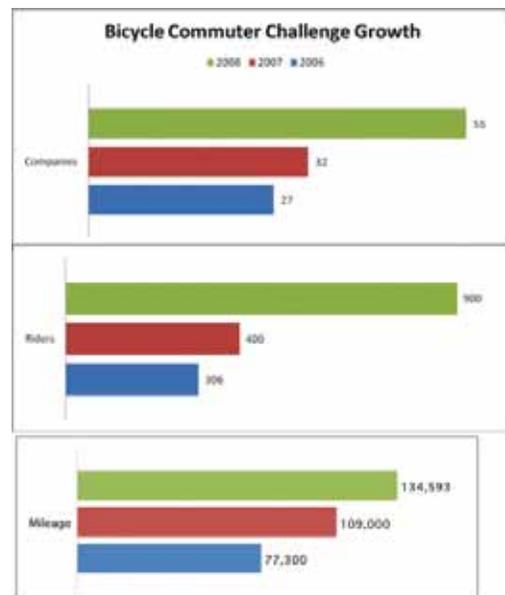
The photographs were initially displayed at a social event and later became a permanent exhibit at the Department of Motor Vehicles and all public libraries. The campaign also featured a toolkit that provided resources to worksites.

“One of the things we heard was people want to be active for their children and their families. So, the second year, we did more things that encourage children being active... We had really unique ideas of ways to be active. Fly kite. Climbing.” -Partner

“We have created banners with all of these posters, or all of these images of people being active. You can see in a lot of them like the Keystone trail or you can see the Downtown River Walk. So, putting in people’s mind that these are average everyday Joes in our community that are being active. It has been a lot of fun. We have had a really good response to the images.” -Staff

► **Bicycle Commuter Challenge**

- Activate Omaha piloted the Bicycle Commuter Challenge in the third year of the ALbD grant in collaboration with the Wellness Council of the Midlands and Bikeable Communities!. The program continued for the remainder of the grant.
- The 14-week challenge was conducted through existing worksite wellness programs and challenged businesses to compete against one another to log the most miles. Participants logged the number of days and miles traveled to work by bicycle and reported the numbers to their team captains online.
- Each spring, certified bicycle instructors conducted bicycle commuter safety training workshops at participating businesses. Bike Commuting 101 manuals were also created and distributed. Education topics included rules of the road, safety, route planning, maintenance, and tips for commuters. Participants also received bi-weekly e-mails from their captains with news, cycling tips, team updates, and motivational messages.
- In the fourth year of the grant, Omaha-Council Bluffs Metro Area Bicycle Transportation Map, a bicycle commuter map, was developed using a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Special Opportunities grant. Challenge participants served on the technical advisory committee that developed and field-tested the maps.
- In the final year of the grant, the Mayor kicked off the Challenge by announcing his support for a bicycle-friendly Omaha. Five-thousand copies of the Bicycle Transportation Map were distributed in one month through local bike shops, bike clubs, and libraries.
- The program was promoted through magazine and newspaper articles and interviews on local television channels. In later years, the program incorporated incentives to attract new participants.
- The program was very successful. In the first year, over 300 participants from 27 businesses logged 77,000 miles, or \$11,000 savings in fuel. Subsequent years saw increases (109,000 miles in year four and 135,000 miles in year five).
- The partnership viewed the program as a way to generate evidence and support for the need for infrastructure change.



“We also do our bike to work challenge, where companies are competing against each other, logging their miles and their days. We have had a lot of fun with that. Riders are super excited about it. They love to track. I think they love to report to someone that they have ridden this far for this meeting. You know, it is kind of a bragging rights thing.” -Partner

“And, our whole goal with [the Bicycle Commuter Challenge, to start with, was to gain visibility. We felt like we were on the cusp of asking for these infrastructure changes and we really needed to show that there was a need for it. So, we wanted to start tracking how many people are commuting by bicycle and also encourage new riders to get out there and do it” -Staff

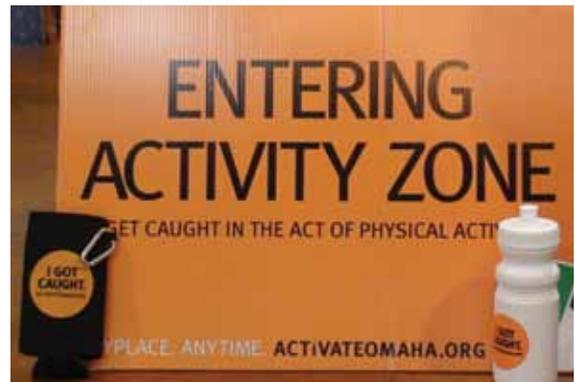
“Well, the newsletter... we tried to just give some general tips about how to be a safe commuter and that type of thing and to give updates on how the challenge is going. But, we also found a lot of advocacy opportunities, you know, federal legislation is pending, you know, if you want to write or find out about it or put your total support, here is who you would contact. There’s a congressional caucus, a bipartisan caucus out there, here is who they are and what they do.” -Staff

► **Sprint Through the Holidays**

- In the first year of the grant, Activate Omaha created a seasonal social marketing campaign, called Sprint Through the Holidays, to help residents avoid gaining weight during the holiday season. The program was created in conjunction with an annual social marketing campaign, but continued throughout the grant period.
- Participants receive a weekly e-mail newsletter with tips focusing on nutrition, physical activity and stress management, as well as an interactive food guide with serving size recommendations, calorie counter, pedometer, and walking logs. Prizes donated by local businesses were distributed at the end of the program.
- Partners publicized Sprint through the Holidays through newspaper, radio, and community events, resulting in over 400 participants during the first year. The program continued to attract more participants each year.

► **Caught in the Act**

- Caught in the Act was developed in the third year of the ALbD grant as part of the annual social marketing campaign.
- The partnership published an event or location at which members would be present in the Thursday edition of the local newspaper. Staff and partners present at the event “caught” residents being active and rewarded them with incentives (e.g., visors, water bottles, coupons).
- Active individuals could have their photograph taken and published on the Activate Omaha website and were also recognized by name in a half-page or full-page advertisement in the newspaper.
- The promotion continued over the course of the grant. Hundreds of residents were rewarded.
- This promotion encouraged residents to be active and drew attention to existing community programs and events by encouraging the use of existing trails, parks, and greenspaces.



► **Activate Omaha Website**

- Activate Omaha created a website (www.activateomaha.org) that served several functions for the partnership, while reaching a broad population. The website provided active living links and resources, updates about upcoming events, program information, social marketing messages, and data collection.
- The website underwent many updates in order to accommodate the growth of the partnership and design, formatting, and technical updates for the website's aesthetic appeal and functionality.



► **Bike to Work Week**

- In the third year of the grant, the partnership worked with the mayor to establish Bike to Work Week to encourage employees to commute to work by bike. The event consisted of bike rides and other promotions.
- The event continued in the final years of the grant and generated enough support that the Mayor expanded the event to be Bike to Work Month.

► **Keystone Gateway to Active Living**

- The Keystone Gateway to Active Living program was developed to provide an opportunity for children to bicycle and explore the local Keystone Trail, while educating them about cycling for recreation and transportation and the importance of staying active and healthy.
- Bikes and helmets were purchased with grant funds. Children visited a local bike shop to select a bike to use and received basic bike maintenance and safety education.
- Participants then rode on Keystone Trail to Wild Oats grocery store for a hands-on class about healthy eating.
- The program provided children without access to trails or safe places to ride bikes with an opportunity to cycle. The program also encouraged children to become advocates for change in their communities.
- At the end of the program, select youth gave presentations about ways to improve the trail to the Douglas County Board of Health and the Papio Natural Resources District.
- The program increased from 24 youth rides in 2007 to 50 youth rides in 2008. Each ride served 15 youth.

“So, they are getting out there and getting some exercise and learning about the trail system. But we also try to impart to them how important it is for them to realize that wheeling may be an opportunity for them in the future as well.” -Staff

► **Walk Your Way (Safe Routes to School)**

- Activate Omaha launched a five-week Safe Routes to School pilot program, Walk Your Way, at two schools, Fontenelle and Highland Elementary, in the second year of the grant. Over 100 children participated.
- A third school, Picotte Elementary, began to offer Safe Routes to School programming in the third year of the grant. In the final year of the grant, two more were added: Dundee Elementary and Westbrook Elementary.
- Walking School Bus training workshops were held for parents, teachers, and other volunteers. These volunteers, along with police officers, supervised nine Walking School Bus days. Participation in the Walking School Buses tripled over the course of the program.
- Organizations such as the YMCA and the National Parks Service spoke with participating students about physical activity, nutrition, crime, safety, and the environment during the walks.



► **Other Programmatic and Promotional Efforts**

- To introduce the ALbD initiative to Omaha, the partnership hosted the Get Active Expo in the first year of the grant with a special guest speaker, Dr. Phil McGraw. The event was publicized through newspaper articles and word of mouth.
- In the first year of the grant, Activate Omaha co-sponsored historic walks with neighborhood associations and the University of Nebraska Medical Center. In year three, the partnership co-hosted historic walking tours with Landmarks, Inc.
- In the third year of the grant, Activate Omaha completed the Citizen's Manual, which instructed residents in how to advocate for changes in their neighborhood. The manual was available on the Activate Omaha website and was distributed at various neighborhood organizations and gatherings (e.g., Neighborhood Center, Neighborhood Builders block meetings).
- Activate Omaha created a media toolkit for distribution to worksites to promote active living in the workplace. The kit included posters, newsletter content, payroll stuffers, and more. CEOs also received letters explaining the relationships between and roles of upper management, wellness committees, and the general population in improving health.
- Activate Omaha exhibited at approximately 100 events each year of the grant.
- The partnership hosted a League of American Bicyclists Road and League Certified Instructor (LCI) training for interested individuals. Seven participants became Nebraska's first certified LCI trainers.

Challenges and Successes

Staff, partners, and community members identified a number of facilitators to implementing programs and promotions:

- One of the largest strengths of the Activate Omaha partnership was that it developed and implemented programs that catered to the interests of its target population. For example, businesses and employees yearned for the competitiveness of the bicycle commuter challenge, children sought opportunities to be active like those offered through Keystone Gateway to Active Living, and community members wanted to be acknowledged and rewarded for being active as with Caught in the Act.
- Having supportive school personnel and parents was identified as an important element in implementing a successful school-based program, such as Walking School Bus.
- The partnership noted several benefits to a clear branding scheme, including having a solid foundation for the development of other initiatives, greater reach and resonance of active living messages, and greater ease obtaining funding and resources.
- Buy-in from business leaders was integral to the success of workplace wellness because they had the ability to encourage employee participation, influence other business leaders to implement similar programs, and provide necessary resources for a successful program.

“I feel like the awareness of Activate Omaha has created such a great brand out there that... it has been a lot easier, it's never easy but it's been a lot easier to get organizations to fund things like [active living projects].” -Partner

Staff, partners, and community members identified a number of challenges to implementing programs and promotions:

- Reaching residents who were less active and encouraging them to become involved was difficult because the partnership had to first demonstrate that active living could add value to their lives.
- Engaging workplaces in programs was difficult when there was a lack of proper resources and support from management.
- The Get Active Expo with Dr. Phil damaged many newly-formed partnerships because of poor organization and timing.

Sustainability

Activate Omaha recognized early on that a partnership was necessary for sustaining the local active living movement. As a result, the partnership began to assert itself in ways that helped maintain efforts beyond the initial grant period. For example, the partnership established itself as a leader in physical activity initiatives in Omaha. The community began to look to Activate Omaha for resources and opportunities to be active. The partnership worked to leverage resources, establish connections, and connect with complementary efforts that would ensure Activate Omaha would continue beyond the ALbD grant period.

“At the beginning it really was, the topic or the idea of Complete Streets or bike lanes wasn’t on anybody’s radar, and over time they have become some of our best advocates, in particular the city and county governments. I think part of the advantage has been that we didn’t come out like gangbusters, but we took a few years to establish our credibility, and show we follow through with what we do, we follow our mission, our vision. And they have become, as a result they have become advocates of what we do.” -Staff

Partners employed strategic budgeting and sought additional funding from a variety of local, state, and national organizations. An 18-month sustainability grant was received from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to allow the partnership to continue its work. Partners planned to focus on two priority projects during this time: management and expansion of the 19-mile bike loop and the establishment of a bike and pedestrian advisory committee, known as the Balanced Transportation Committee. At the end of the grant period, Activate Omaha, Alegent, and the Bike/Pedestrian Committee met to discuss a proposed Balanced Transportation Coordinator position that would be temporarily funded by Alegent, hosted by the City, and responsible for following through with ideas generated by the Bike/Pedestrian Committee.

In 2006, Activate Omaha and Alegent Health Systems hosted a two-day community summit to discuss what the Metropolitan Omaha area should and could do to prevent and reduce childhood obesity over the next decade. At the end of the summit, participants crafted a shared vision that by 2011 Omaha would be nationally recognized as a collaborative model achieving measurable improvement in fitness and nutrition of children. Six areas of focus were identified as well as specific strategies and implementation timelines. The following committees were formed to implement these goals: evaluation, physical environment, physical activity, nutrition, social marketing, and funding and resources. The outcome of this community summit, eventually known as Activate Omaha Kids, created a community-wide momentum for sustaining Activate Omaha’s active living efforts.

“In the last year another initiative has come up, called Activate Omaha Kids, which is focusing on trying to reverse physical inactivity and poor nutrition within youth. And that...although we do not fund it directly, we purposely aligned it so that we can try to build up on the brand and momentum of Activate Omaha.” -Partner

Likewise, when several CEOs began developing an action plan to make Omaha one of the healthiest cities in the nation by 2020, Activate Omaha was called upon to support and guide the new initiative. This initiative, called Top 10 in 10, provided another platform for sustaining the active living movement.

These and other initiatives (e.g., Pioneering Healthy Communities) chose to operate under the umbrella of Our Healthy Community Partnership, creating a comprehensive and interconnected active living movement that will continue to be a catalyst for change in Omaha.

Acknowledgements

This evaluation and report were developed under the leadership of Laura Brennan, PhD, MPH, Principal Investigator, Transtria LLC, and Ross Brownson, PhD, Co-Principal Investigator, Washington University Institute for Public Health. Support for this evaluation was provided by a grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (#57649). Transtria LLC led the evaluation and dissemination activities from November 2006 to December 2009. For more information about the evaluation and dissemination methods, activities or results, please contact Laura Brennan (laura@transtria.com).

Our team is grateful for the collaboration and support from the staff at Our Healthy Community Partnership and the Activate Omaha partnership in Omaha, Nebraska.

With special thanks to the many individuals who have contributed to these efforts from Transtria LLC (Anna Alexandrov; Joanna Bender; Shruthi Bhatt; Yolanda Campbell; Julie Claus, MPH; Kathryn Coniglio, MPH; Kate Dickman; Kate Donaldson, MPH; Melissa Hall, MPH; Courtney Jones, MPH; Shannon Keating; Allison Kemner, MPH; Benjamin Krause; Amy Krieg; Lisa Meng; Lauren Middendorff; Luke Odom; Regina Quadir, MPH; Laura Runnels, MPH; Elsa Taricone, MPH; Cindy Thomas, MPH; Sarah Weiner), Saint Louis University School of Public Health (Elizabeth Baker, PhD, MPH), Active Living By Design (Rich Bell, MCP; Phil Bors, MPH; Mark Dessauer, MA; Joanne Lee, LDN, RD, MPH; Mary Beth Powell, MPH; Sarah Strunk, MHA; Risa Wilkerson, MA), National Park Service (Helen Mahan), Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (Laura Leviton, PhD; Jamie Bussel, MPH), University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health (Kelly Evenson, PhD), University of California at Davis (Susan Handy, PhD), Wholonomy Consulting (Katherine Kraft, PhD), San Diego State University and Active Living Research (James Sallis, PhD), and Innovative Graphic Services (Joseph Karolczak).