

Making Healthy Choices, Easy Choices: Linking Health and Environment

Ruth Abad

Creating healthy communities across the state will not only slow the increase in the proportion of adults who are obese and reduce rates of chronic disease, but also improve the quality of life for Washington residents.

The Healthy Communities Project was designed as a model for local communities to work together with policy makers to build and support environments that make it easier for people to be physically active and choose healthy foods. It is based on the Social-Ecological Model, which describes the five spheres that influence health behaviors: individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and public policy.

The multilevel approach is essential to sustaining healthy choices in the population over time. Individually focused models alone have not been sufficient to change nutrition and physical activity patterns. Environmental and policy approaches, on the other hand, have a long history of success in improving health and well-being in areas such as food safety and traffic fatalities.

In 2001, the Washington State Department of Health was awarded funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to develop a Healthy Communities Project aimed at the promotion of nutrition and physical activity for the prevention of chronic disease and obesity (see box for costs of physical activity in Washington). In 2003 the department selected Moses Lake, located in the Columbia Basin region of eastern Washington, as a pilot city in the project, and in 2004 it added Mount Vernon, located in northwest

Washington along the I-5 corridor between Seattle and Vancouver, as the state's second pilot city.

Moses Lake and Mount Vernon take action

Moses Lake and Mount Vernon are both small, rural communities. Moses Lake has 15,442 residents, and Mount Vernon has 26,670. Both cities' populations are about 25 percent Hispanic.

In developing their Healthy Communities plans, both cities used a community development model to involve residents in assessing the environmental barriers to physical activity. The first task was to bring together community advisory groups charged with the task of creating an action plan. Each city's group included the mayor, administrators from the county public health department, the director of the city parks and recreation department, and community physical activity and nutrition advocates.

The goals that guided the Healthy Communities Project planning process included:

- Building partnerships and opportunities for collaboration across a large, diverse group of community partners
- Identifying factors that affect nutrition and physical activity choices, using a comprehensive assessment process
- Supporting community efforts for improving nutrition and physical activity through environmental and policy change

The assessment processes involved conducting a number of focus groups of both English- and Spanish-speaking residents to identify their perception of changes in the environment that would make it easier for them to be physically active and choose healthy foods. Community volunteers conducted nutritious food and walkability assessments of each neighborhood.

With this information and the strategies and best practices described in the *Washington State Nutrition and Physical Activity Plan: Policy and Environmental Approaches* (see box on page 13 for more information about the plan), each advisory committee then chose specific priority strategies that became the Moses Lake Healthy Communities Action Plan and the Mount Vernon Healthy Communities Action Plan.

Selecting strategies

To meet their vision of a community where residents can enjoy an active, healthy lifestyle

Cost of Physical Inactivity Is Staggering

A recent study, conducted by Health Management Associates for the Washington State Department of Health and the Washington Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity, concluded that physical inactivity contributes to chronic diseases and loss of work productivity. Direct costs were estimated to be \$118 million in cardiovascular disease, \$44.6 million in mental health due to depression and anxiety, \$17.3 million in muscle and bone injuries, \$9 million in diabetes and other metabolic disorders, \$7.4 million from breast and colon cancer, and \$1.3 million from carpal tunnel syndrome and other repetitive injuries. Indirect costs identified as lost work productivity, total \$4.6 billion.

Overall, the report illustrates that physical inactivity has a profound effect on the present and future health, productivity, economic status, and longevity of Washington residents.

The executive summary of the report, *The Economic Cost of Physical Inactivity Among Washington State Adults*, is available online at www.doh.wa.gov/cfh/NutritionPa/publications/the_cost_of_inactivity.pdf. The complete report is available on request by calling 360-236-3623. ■

that includes nutritious foods, recreation, and positive interactions, the Moses Lake advisory committee selected three strategies:

- Develop a network of linked paths throughout the city for exercise, recreation, transportation, and tourism to promote healthier lifestyles for the community
- Promote, protect, and support breastfeeding in the community, so good nutrition at birth is the basic part of nutrition throughout life
- Create a community garden for all city residents to grow healthy food, enjoy healthy leisure activity, learn about gardening, nutrition, and preparing food, and eat more fruits and vegetables

The Mount Vernon plan has one nutrition and two physical activity priority objectives, one of which is to increase the number of active community environments. The specific recommendations selected from the state plan are:

- Ensure schools provide healthful foods and beverages
- Use urban planning approaches such as zoning and land use that promote physical activity
- Increase the number of physical activity opportunities available to children

Developing new partners for public health

The leadership in both cities recognized the advantage and necessity of linking up with organizations that are not traditional partners with public health. The Washington Chapter, the American Society of Landscape Architects, and the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program of the National Park Service contributed expertise in community building as part of the action-planning process in Moses Lake. Along with the Washington State Department of Health, they signed a partnership agreement to organize and facilitate a community-based design workshop (*charrette*) to develop a pathways and trail system for the Moses Lake area. Local landscape designers, architects, and city residents participated in the three-day charrette.

Supporting active community environments

To assist Mount Vernon in implementing its Healthy Communities Action Plan, the RTCA is working with the city and Skagit County around a potentially contentious issue: opening the river levees on the Skagit River for public access. For a number of years many residents recognized the physical infrastructure and placement of the dikes as an ideal site for walking, biking, and

other recreation. Many of the levees, however, are on private property, so public access has raised concerns with a number of the property owners. RTCA will conduct a community process to bring together diverse stakeholders to discuss the use of the Skagit River levees for public use. The result will determine whether to develop a strategic plan for creating a nine-mile Skagit River trail in Mount Vernon.

Members of the Mount Vernon Healthy Communities Project are actively involved in a Non-Motorized Citizen's Advisory Group that advises the Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) and Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). The committee provides guidance to the RTPO/MPO on policy change and allocation of funds for sidewalks, trails, bike lanes, and other non-motorized facilities. Without this grassroots input, funding to build non-motorized transportation may not occur or be sustained over time. This effort ensures the necessary infrastructure is in place to support active community environments.

Lessons learned

The most important lesson both Mount Vernon and Moses Lake learned is the importance of listening to the people in the community. Another lesson is the challenge of nurturing and developing leadership in the community so if current leaders move on, the efforts continue. The goal of leadership development in both communities is to empower a variety of community members with the skills and confidence to facilitate a planning process, seek out new and unique partners, empower other community volunteers, and work with the community to create and carry out the vision of a healthy community.

Community leaders in both Moses Lake and Mount Vernon agree that the planning process takes time and patience, which is often frustrating to community advocates who are action focused. The tradeoff, however, is an action plan with strategies a community can embrace as its own. 🐾

Author

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Guidelines for Action

The *Washington State Nutrition and Physical Activity Plan: Policy and Environmental Approaches*, created by the Washington State Department of Health and its partners, is a guideline for action that targets changes in the environment and policies to make the healthy choice the easy choice. It includes recommendations to support land use planning, non-motorized transportation, safe routes to school, worksite policies, state and local recreation facilities, and physical education in schools. Without a supportive environment, individuals cannot make the choice to be physically active. ■

Resources

Mattessich P, Monsey B. Community Building: What Makes It Work: A Review of Factors Influencing Successful Community Building. Saint Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. 2001.

Moses Lake Healthy Communities Project. depts.washington.edu/dohwnps/MosesLake/.

Mount Vernon Healthy Communities Project. depts.washington.edu/dohwnps/MountVernon/.

National Charrette Institute. www.charretteinstitute.org.