

A Walking Path to Enlightenment

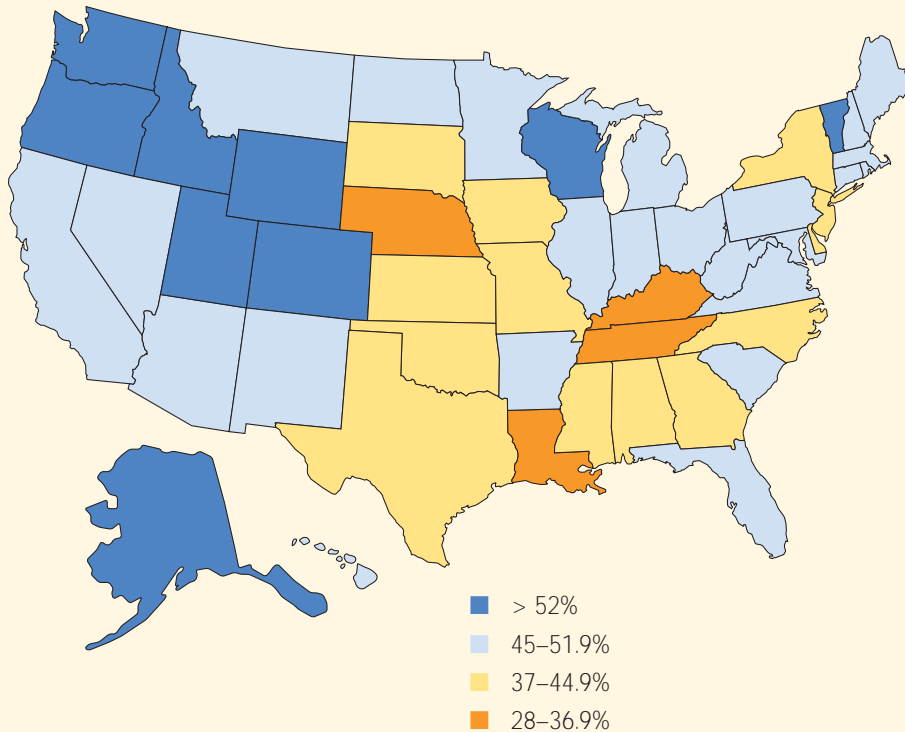
Community design that promotes active living can help prevent obesity

By Jenny Sewell

As guardians of the public's health, policy-makers have a vested interest in responding to the rise in obesity. A recent report from the Trust for America's Health noted that about 65 percent of the U.S. population is overweight or obese, costing the U.S. health care system more than \$117 billion per year in direct and indirect medical costs. Citizens support a role for government in this fight. A recent nationwide survey of adults sponsored by the Harvard Forums on Health found that 81 percent of respondents think government should play some role in fighting obesity and 76 percent would support measures to combat childhood obesity even if it meant paying more taxes.

But what options are there besides improving nutrition? Just as doctors encourage patients to tackle obesity on two fronts—by changing eating and exercise habits—so must policy-makers. Research shows that programs that address community planning and active living are critical.

Percent of adults 18 years of age and older who engage in activities consistent with physical activity recommendations, 2001



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Maine

Like many states, Maine provides grants to communities to revitalize struggling downtowns. In 2000, Maine passed legislation favoring the award of these grants to communities that had incorporated the goals of smart growth into their planning processes. These goals include mixed-use development, urban infill, and transportation planning that allows for biking and walking paths.

Michigan

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has been a strong advocate of active living, including sponsoring a “Cool Cities” initiative that provides small grants to communities that want to expand parks, improve sidewalks and streets, or undertake other activities that promote physical activity. Other state leaders have also gotten involved, including Dr. Kimberlydawn Wisdom, the state’s surgeon general. Her project, “Prescription for a Healthier Michigan,” makes a number of recommendations, including that K-12 schools integrate health and physical education into school curriculums.

“It is our own personal choices and commitments that will make the difference in our health and the health of our communities, allowing us to turn our focus from treating health conditions to health promotion and disease prevention,” Wisdom said.

Texas

The Texas Department of Health is working with schools and communities to set up walking trails in community parks and on school grounds. The initiative is under the auspices of the department’s Public Health Promotion Program.

But even as these programs are implemented, other states seem to be taking a step back. For example, money designated for building schools often encourages megacampuses on the edge of a town instead of revamping older, community schools. Because of this, fewer students live within walking distance of their school. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, today only 20 percent of students live within a mile of their school, compared with 35 percent in 1969.

First Steps

For state policy-makers new to the concept of incorporating active living principles into community planning, several first steps can be taken:

- **Build new partnerships.** Active living isn’t just an issue for state health leaders. In addition to the dietitians and nutritionists who have been so integral in addressing access to healthy

The Connection Between Health and Community

The concept of designing communities to encourage active living may be new to some, especially individuals who live in towns and cities where it is nearly impossible to safely carry out day-to-day tasks without getting in a car. Biking or walking to work, school or the grocery may be difficult—or even dangerous—because of the distances involved or because of a lack of sidewalks or cycle paths.

Eliminating these barriers to physical activity is at the heart of healthy community design and active living. Studies show that where a person lives can affect his or her activity level. A recent article published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* reports that individuals living in communities rated “highly walkable” were 2.4 times more likely to get 30 minutes or more of moderate physical exercise per day than individuals living in communities ranked low for walkability. “These results support the rationale for the development of policy that promotes increased levels of land-use mix, street connectivity, and residential density as interventions that can have lasting public health benefits,” noted the report’s authors.

Model Initiatives

Living up to their designation of “laboratories of democracy,” several states have carved out their roles in supporting active living and community design.

food, this approach will bring together planners, engineers, transportation experts and even agriculture personnel.

- **Lead the way.** While many zoning questions are decided locally, state policy-makers can serve as leaders by educating constituents and championing active community planning.
- **Model behavior.** Many state leaders recognize that if they want their constituents to be more active, they must change their own behaviors. In 2004, Colorado Gov. Bill Owens announced that whenever possible he was going to use the stairs instead of the elevator as part of a program he called "Frequent These Flights." The CDC supports these types of initiatives. Its Web site offers downloadable signs encouraging people to take the stairs, such as "the cheapest gym anywhere....the stairs." (To learn more, go to www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/stairwell/index.htm.)
- **Make it happen.** Emphasize active living when planning or funding state projects. This could mean that all new state road construction is evaluated for parallel bike or walking paths, or that trails at state parks are better maintained.

Conclusion

As many a dieter has learned, better eating habits are only one side of the equation. To achieve weight loss, a person has to get moving. States can help in these efforts by supporting the creation of active communities, those in which residents easily incorporate the recommended amount of physical activity just performing daily tasks such as going to work or to the grocery. These communities are not only smart planning, they are smart policy.

—Jenny Sewell is a senior health policy analyst at The Council of State Governments.

Active Living Leadership

State and local leaders who want to find out more about community planning that supports an active lifestyle can contact Active Living Leadership. This group of leading state and local policy organizations, which is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and includes The Council of State Governments, has formed to provide education and outreach to its members. To learn more, go to www.activelivingleadership.org.



healthy states

CSG's partnership to promote public health



In partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The Council of State Governments announces its new Healthy States initiative to educate state officials on public health issues. Areas include cancer, diabetes, immunization, school health and environmental health.

Look for these new resources and services:

- Quarterly newsletter, issue briefs and other publications
- e-Weekly
- Inquiry service
- Issues analysis
- Comprehensive website

For more information, check out the Healthy States website at www.healthystates.csg.org.