

# Place-Based Practices Shape the Healthy Communities Movement

BY MONTE ROULIER

In 1995, a group of Scranton, Pennsylvania, civic leaders concluded it was time for a new way to approach the region's future. Inspired by several other communities using a Healthy Communities process, they launched Forging the Future. At the time, this long-term, vision-driven, holistic, participative, asset-oriented, and upstream model was a radical departure from the status quo.

Over a period of about fourteen months, nearly four hundred stakeholders came together regularly to develop a plan that would bend negative trends and realize untapped potential. The planning process birthed an ambitious fifteen-year vision, and seven key performance work teams focused on areas such as economy and jobs and art and culture. Even though Scranton was experiencing one of the highest downtown business vacancy rates in the country, the group implemented a number of strategies to revitalize the downtown through a coordinated approach to arts, culture, and tourism. The plan took advantage of local talent and of aging, although once wonderful, music and theater venues. The initiators saw the overall process as a means to foster a greater sense of community, a prime motivation of other healthy community efforts at the time.

Technological and social changes of the last twenty to twenty-five years have profoundly influenced the ways communities approach the work of health and quality-of-life improvements. Few communities today would be willing or able to pull off a fourteen-month planning process with over three hundred stakeholders on a broad range of focus areas. Forging the Future leaders used snail mail and the telephone as the primary mode of communication. Having never experienced meetings where stakeholders possessed smart phones (and the competing interests of real-time texts/e-mail/Facebook), they could not imagine the level and depth of access to information and data made possible through a Google search or Web-based apps. Nor could they imag-

ine that an obesity epidemic and lifestyle-induced chronic diseases would eventually dominate the focus of the vast majority of Healthy Communities efforts across the country. A new landscape of challenges and opportunities has forced new ways of addressing community change. These new approaches are commonly referred to as place-based strategies, an emergent transformative force within the larger Healthy Communities movement.

Place-based approaches recognize that where we spend most of our time—neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and places of worship—has enormous influence on the choices we make each day. An overarching theme is making the healthy choice the easy choice. The many community change efforts that comprise this place-based movement often place a strong emphasis on healthy eating and active living (HEAL); policy making and environmental changes to shift behavior and norms and health equity; or acting to address the growing health disparities, particularly with low-income and minority community members, that are largely rooted in factors related to place.

Although there are no exact formulas for place-based approaches, there are clear essential practices that lead to its enhanced benefits and results. Five emerging essential practices are discussed next.

## Weave Mutual Interests into a Common Vision

Working with a shared vision as starting point has been a staple practice for most healthy community efforts and entails much more than simply crafting a nice vision statement. It requires a critical mass of community members and partners sharing a vision or common understanding of both the benefits to be derived and the nature of underlying challenges.

Individuals and organizations alike need to see how fundamental needs and interests will be met through

this common vision. LiveWell Greenville (LWG) in South Carolina was able to do just that when it envisioned a more walkable/bikeable community and made the case for investing substantial resources in trailheads (one being central to downtown trail networks). The local Chamber of Commerce recognized how this strategy could contribute to quality of life and to recruitment of new business. The school district viewed trails and related street enhancements as creating safer and more healthful ways for children to get to school (and potentially to save money on busing). Greenville's two primary hospitals found walking trails to be an asset in chronic disease prevention and management. As LWG coordinator Eleanor Dunlap said, "Our partners may use slightly different words to make the case for active transportation—bikeable, walkable, and connected to public transportation—in Greenville, but we all recognize we are describing the same desired future."

The shared vision for active transportation allowed the LWG partners to build a broad constituency and to persevere through legal challenges and also through early but vocal citizen opposition, regulatory roadblocks, and financial setbacks. The partners knew they had a good chance of shifting the way community members got around by providing the choice of easily accessible trails connecting to practical and compelling destinations. The Swamp Rabbit, a 17.5-mile multi-use trail system running along the Reedy River connecting Greenville County with schools, parks, and local businesses, opened in 2010 and has seen extraordinary increases in usage each year since—more than meeting the mutual interest of the partners. It has become a prized asset and has led to a chain of additional actions.

LWG is using this same formula for four other goal areas:

1. To help different sectors and community partnerships discover mutual interests
2. To act in concert on big policy or environmental changes (e.g., the trail system and funding mechanisms)
3. To support coordination among various initiatives (e.g., outreach or installation of bike racks)
4. To tether vision to measurable strategies and outcomes

### Make Wise Use of Data and Technology

The need to save time and resources has prompted collaboratives to rethink strategies for data collection, analysis, and management. New technologies for securing, visualizing, and managing data are improving assessment, case making, and performance.

A place-based collaborative in the Quad Cities region on the border of Illinois and Iowa is finding new ways to use data and technology. Access to healthy foods is a growing concern for regional leaders and community members, prompting the Quad Cities collaborative to move toward creating a regional food system with a sustainable food access plan. As a starting point, an accurate map was developed of the region's food deserts, a term used to describe places where it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find fresh, affordable fruits and vegetables. A Web-based mapping utility secured by the United Way allowed coalition members to combine and correlate locally collected data (from grocery stores and food pantries) with other relevant publicly available data on a broad range of focal areas, such as schools, poverty, and the retail food environment. The result is a Web-based map that allows the entire community to identify neighborhoods and areas in greatest need of healthy and affordable food outlets. Maps enable the coalition to engage the tacit wisdom of a broader set of community stakeholders—adding insight into the specific challenges and generating solutions. The maps are easily updated to show new assets and progress toward shrinking the food deserts.

The Quad Cities coalition recognized the need to be utilization focused in its data and assessment for the place-based efforts. Although former community health needs assessments offered some context, subcounty-level data are needed to pinpoint challenges and opportunities. Securing data at zip code level (e.g., for schools and fast food locations) and/or at block level has become essential for place-based strategies. More communities like Quad Cities are also utilizing tools geared to HEAL assessments—such as the YMCA's Community Healthy Living Index or doing walkability and/or food access audits—to collect meaningful observational data in and around settings where people live, work, attend school, or play.

Many communities are drowning in a sea of data and often have duplicate assessment and data collection efforts. The LiveWell Omaha partnership in Douglas County, Nebraska, is evolving a Web-based system and processes to ensure that its community improvement efforts share reliable health and quality-of-life indicators. The business, nonprofit, and government leaders who share governance for LiveWell Omaha have come to realize that a shared measurement system with common measures serves an important role in community discussion, community education, and collective action.

### Artfully Blend Policies, Programs, and Promotion

Policy and environmental strategies are essential for deep and sustained change, but the greatest impact generally comes when these are combined with programs and creative promotion.

For example, the PedNet Coalition in Columbia, Missouri, found that policies and environmental improvements—street improvements involving sidewalks, crosswalks, bike lanes, and crossing guards—alone would not lead to long-term behavior changes. It would take a combination of these improvements plus programs—in particular, Columbia’s nationally recognized “walking school bus” and bicycle safety courses—to tip behavior change so that children and families would begin walking or bicycling to school.

Each year PedNet and scores of partners sponsor “Bike, Walk & Wheel Week,” a highly visible and popular week of music in the parks, bike giveaways (recycling bikes for lower-income families), breakfast stations at schools and workplaces promoting biking/walking, and a local celebrity car versus bike challenge. This event is strategically aimed at recruiting families to participate in walking school bus programs (a walking school bus is a group of children walking to school with one or more adults) and at growing support for future infrastructure investments—building a constituency for change.

Place-based coalitions across the country are turning to full-blown branding strategies and campaigns to help cement and grow communitywide support for place-based changes. For example, a Nashville, Tennessee-based coalition called Nashvitality has been very intentional about branding, coordinating

social media, recognition efforts, and creative advertising. According to David Campbell of the Metro Nashville Health Department, “Nashvitality is now a brand that means something to the residents of Nashville; it means we are striving to live out values of a healthier and greener city. We make sure to connect our many place-based projects—our new bike share program, our workplace wellness initiatives, and our greenway and food access initiatives—to a brand that represents a new way of working and living together.” Plans are under way to encourage and ensure that whenever businesses, schools, and workplaces use the brand, they also adhere to a high level of healthy eating/active living policies and practices.

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### Adopt an Opportunistic and Experimental Mind-set

Long-range action plans become static and are prone to irrelevance when operating in a dynamic political, social, and fiscal environment. Given today’s rapidity of change, the nature of place-based strategies requires a highly adaptable approach. No cookbook exists for executing place-based strategies; rather, effective place-based change leaders increasingly think and behave like social entrepreneurs, testing small changes and scaling what works. When anchored with a strong vision, place-based coalitions can afford to be highly adaptable, even opportunistic, while maintaining fidelity to their long-term goals.

Investing in complete street policies and strategies (e.g., making it easy to cross the streets, walk to shops, and bicycle to work) was an aspiration, though not initially a top priority, for Birmingham Alabama’s Health Action Partnership (HAP), primarily because of the perceived political and fiscal climate. Things changed when the mayor and City of Birmingham decided to move forward with a sizable repaving project to be completed prior to Birmingham’s hosting the international Davis Cup Tennis Tournament. HAP members seized the opportunity to educate city leaders about the benefits of complete streets. They convinced leaders to

make slight adjustments to the paving project, such as striping bike lanes and adding signage (which would have been much more costly to do later). HAP was able to capitalize on the opportunity because the members were flexible.

Effective coalitions constantly scan for assets and opportunities. Such opportunities often arise unexpectedly. HAP was also working to link healthy eating and physical activity with smoke-free environments. After a poll showed stronger-than-anticipated community support for tobacco-free environments, HAP learned of an interest in smoke-free ordinances on the part of two influential bar owners and seized on another opportunity. Its approach of combining a pilot program of smoke-free nights at the most popular bars along with a coordinated media effort presenting data from polls to justify public support became instrumental in advancing smoke-free policies. Highlighting a pressing problem that needs a solution and building on existing assets are great ways to generate momentum. Assets may include willing volunteers or school or civic leaders who like to be early adopters.

A network of youth-serving organizations banded together in Nashville to test organizational policies and practices that lead to healthful eating and more active environments for youth. They came together over a six-month period to experiment with evidence-based strategies. They looked at what worked, what did not work, and effective ways to scale strategies in an effort to create healthier “youth zones” across the metro area. A group of participating organizations that included the YMCA, United Way, and Boys & Girls Club entered the collaborative experiment with the attitude that failures are to be expected and provide good opportunities for learning and adapting, a powerful approach that is bearing results and often snowballs into other viable opportunities and even greater results.

#### **Distribute Leadership and Spread the Movement**

Most of these initiatives have ambitious aims, limited staffing, and strong reliance on volunteers. Place-based initiatives are often complex—involving many organizations and partners—and do not rely on hierarchy or individual organizations to mandate performance. This coordinated work effort looks

more like movement mobilization than program management.

No single model exists for leading and organizing a place-based collaborative. Some communities house them within existing organizations, such as health departments or YMCAs, and some incorporate them as separate nonprofit organizations, while others rely on a variety of collaborative partners to fulfill these core leadership and support functions. Whatever model is used, the effective ones usually have these characteristics:

- *Engage the right mix of individuals.* At the core they have a strong leadership team with a mix of individuals representing different sectors and perspectives and willing to contribute their influence, skills, and/or networks for the greater good of the community. They also have action teams/work groups that include an appropriate mix of partners, content experts, and stakeholders (including those who shoulder the greatest burden of health disparities) who can implement targeted strategies effectively.
- *Build team and team skills.* A group working together needs solid relationships and a sense of being part of a team to perform well. Annmarie Medina of Activate Tucson said, “Making time for our respective team relationships outside of a traditional meeting format—doing site visits, watching movies, and eating together—as well as attending relevant learning events, has helped us build trust and stick together when things get tough.” Endeavoring to implement policy and environmental strategies is new territory for many team members; providing them with education and capacity building allows them to contribute fully. Building team skills and capacity often includes helping people find their voices as effective advocates and understand effective ways to influence policy-making processes.
- *Provide collaborative infrastructure.* Collaboration within and across coalition teams requires substantial support: facilitation; communication through meetings, notes, notices, and updated action plans; research to determine proven strategies; evaluation to establish the baseline and identify gaps; and convening meetings. The HAP of Jefferson County, Alabama, leaned on its United

Way partner to help cultivate action team facilitators and to support communication between action teams. This support has been crucial to HAP's successful implementation of place-based solutions.

One key to spreading the movement is to help local organizations adopt their own policies and practices. Because so many of the policy/environmental improvements are also specific to settings, numerous opportunities exist for local organizations to adopt and implement place-unique improvements, for example, helping local nonprofit organizations, small and large workplaces, and places of worship to customize and implement their own healthy-eating, active-living policies and practices. Another improvement might be helping government agencies adopt procurement policies that support healthy eating for employees and contribute to the local food system. These are powerful and sometimes easy ways to reach and engage a broad number of community members and to contribute to core strategies.

Of course, helping community members take basic meaningful daily actions, such as biking to work and supporting the local farmers' market, is also at the heart of changing community norms and spreading the movement.

### Conclusion

Today hundreds of community collaboratives are employing place-based strategies. Many of these have received funding and technical assistance from

sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and/or Kaiser Permanente, along with several larger statewide foundations. Clearly, the increased public focus on the obesity epidemic and issues of physical inactivity and unhealthful nutrition has garnered an unprecedented level of collaboration among funders and researchers as well as state and local networks of place-based coalitions.

As place-based approaches mature, there is a growing recognition that the potential impact of these strategies to combat obesity extends well beyond benefits of community members' physical health. These same strategies have the added benefit of creating physical spaces that are conducive to a greater sense of belonging and social cohesion—a powerful antidote to suburban sprawl and the car-centric landscape of strip malls and fast food joints. They are proving to be a powerful way to reestablish, or create for the first time, places worth caring about. This returns us to the vision and promise of early health community efforts like Forging the Future: To create and sustain health, people need, and are naturally wired to thrive in, places where there is an authentic sense of community and connection to place.

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