



Wake County, North Carolina: A Public-Private Partnership Promotes Active Communities and Active Grant-making

In Wake County, North Carolina, home to the state capitol Raleigh, the John Rex Endowment faced an interesting

dilemma. Formed through the sale of its namesake hospital in 2000, the endowment set a new priority to invest in a Healthy Weight Initiative for children, but the long-term commitment presented several challenges. Where could they receive evaluation support? What programs and organizations offered the best prospects for success? Who would oversee the grantees once they were chosen?



Meanwhile, a team at the Physical Activity and Nutrition (PAN) Branch within the state health department's Division of Public Health had the opposite problem. They had plenty of expertise in overseeing and designing grant programs, innovative and evidence-based ideas about ways that local environments and policies could contribute to healthier communities, and solid connections to community groups, but little discretionary funding to support new initiatives and put their ideas into action. Even if they had, it would have been difficult to launch a grant program quickly, given the state procedures that creating new grants required.

That's where a third nonprofit partner entered the picture. The North Carolina Public Health Foundation was literally made for this situation. The nonprofit was founded in 2003 with the mission of developing resources and otherwise supporting efforts to achieve the North Carolina public health goals and objectives by acting as a fiscal agent between the John Rex Endowment's funds and the PAN team's expertise.

Launching the Active Community and Neighborhood Grant Program

The partnership among these three organizations played to each one's unique strengths and contributions. Building on an earlier and similar community grants program—the Eat Smart Move More (ESMM) Community Grants program—the PAN team helped develop, implement, and evaluate the Active Community and Neighborhood Grants program, first by helping put together a simple Request for Applications (RFA) and distributing it to more than 90 Wake County organizations. After thorough reviews and scoring, 16 applications proposing different ways to increase physical activity among Wake County residents were narrowed down to five awards of approximately \$120,000 each, to be used over a 3-year period. Both the funding level and the multi-year timeframe were designed to support the ambitious environmental changes the partnership envisioned.

The five successful grantees each pursued different approaches to increasing physical activity. A church built an onsite playground and walking trail, encouraging both children and adults to become more active together. Two Wake County communities—Cary and Holly Springs—expanded greenways and sidewalks, connecting their neighborhoods to local schools and parks. The North Carolina Museum of Art installed new pieces of art along a greenway that meanders through the museum's campus, and printed signs and maps to draw visitors to a visually enticing walk through the grounds. A local transit authority used its grant funds to make six bus stops more accessible to walkers and cyclists, adding covered shelters, better seats, and bike racks. Collectively, the five Active Community and Neighborhood grantees reached 141,000 of the county's 900,000 residents and leveraged their John Rex Endowment funding to draw another \$641,000 to their projects.



Along the way to achieving these successes, the program experienced some challenges as well. Staff turnover among grantees and within the PAN Branch slowed activities down at different points. During the 3-year grant cycle, three different grant program coordinators took turns at the helm within PAN. The PAN team's public health evaluation and data collection tools seemed burdensome—especially at first—to the grantees.

Despite these bumps in the road, PAN knew they were on to something. They had learned the value of being much more hands-on—not only with evaluation tools and reporting forms, but with insights about implementing interventions and achieving the types of environmental and policy changes; such as, greenways, playgrounds, and sidewalks that last long after a grant cycle ends.

A Second Grant Cycle—and a Chance to Apply Lessons Learned

PAN was offered another opportunity by the John Rex Endowment to implement a second grant program, spanning from 2011 to 2014. The current grant program, PAN, was more deliberate about drawing a more varied group of grantees into the process, especially those operating in neighborhoods with underserved residents. They sought out organizations with less capacity, holding an introductory meeting to explain the environmental and policy change approach to those unfamiliar with it and helping community organizations think more broadly and ambitiously than a short-term, finite program. Applicants received feedback on their letters of intent. PAN also made an effort to connect to applicants by telephone to help them strengthen their proposals.

In addition to funding implementation grants as they had in the first round, it was decided to add several planning grants to help lower-capacity organizations move along the continuum towards strong implementation. For those ready to implement interventions, PAN provided technical assistance geared towards engaging community residents and helping them feel more ownership of the new approaches being funded by the partnership. Finally, healthy eating was added to the physical activity focus of the first grant program.

The results? Grantees are launching community gardens, walking trails, and a play area and multi-purpose field in a mobile home park.

Adult mentors and youth in a Big Brothers Big Sister program are supporting each other in pursuing healthier eating habits. A Boys and Girls Club has adopted healthier vending machine fare as its cause. And a church has partnered with the local housing authority to create more physical activity opportunities for children in a housing complex. With the infusion of hands-on technical assistance designed to build capacity, the five planning grantees will soon join these implementation grantees in developing new interventions that will lead, step-by- step and bite-by-bite, to a healthier Wake County.

The experience offers many lessons, but as a PAN staff member put it, the main one is being hands on makes a real difference. “We learned that we need to be partners,” she said, “helping grantees identify barriers and develop strategies—instead of just providing funding and reviewing reports.”



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