



Washington: Building Capacity, Building Healthy Communities in Washington State

Sometimes you need a little nudge, or perhaps a little guidance, to figure out how to move things forward. This is exactly what the Washington State Department of Health did to support five communities in making positive changes to help reduce obesity and increase healthy eating and physical activity.

As a part of their Healthy Communities Initiative, the Washington State Department of Health wanted to create a simple, easy to use workbook to help communities conduct local assessments and use the data to inform decision making processes for suitable nutrition and physical activity initiatives. What the Department of Health learned while reviewing different assessment tools was that the time typically required to collect, analyze, and interpret data on policies and environments would be daunting for communities with limited skills and capacity for the work. In moving forward with developing the Healthy Communities Assessment Workbook, it was decided that a basic framework for community assessments would be provided using data that had been collected and already analyzed by the Department of Health for each community. To assist with this effort, the Washington State Department of Health turned inward for expertise and guidance, looking at what other intervention-based programs had done in the past. They also turned to their university and federal partners, as well as their counterparts in Oregon, to help gather information for the workbooks.

The workbooks included maps of locations where residents could go for physical activities, such as parks or school tracks. They also included maps of grocery and convenience stores, and fast food locations to capture the communities' access to food—healthy or not. Health and census data for each community was also provided in the workbooks. Additional environmental assessment tools, to be completed by the local community, were added to compliment the maps and data. Each community was trained on how to use their workbook, including step-by-step instructions on how to interpret the maps, and how to collect, analyze, and interpret data from the different assessment tools. The five participating local health jurisdictions were unique because they had not previously participated in Department of Health nutrition and physical activity grant programs to address obesity. Counties were selected on the basis of compelling statistics related to health and opportunities to build capacity. These counties had more residents with low-income, less education, and less health insurance. Additionally, residents had some of the highest rates of obesity and obesity-related illnesses in the state.



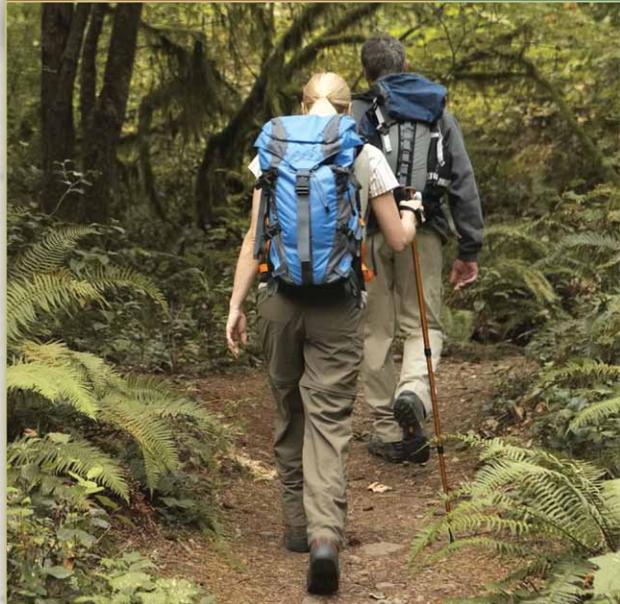
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In less than a year and a half, communities that started with limited capacity in data collection and analysis were able to complete assessments and translate data into action plans that led to policy and environmental changes. In several communities farmers' markets and community gardens were developed or expanded to increase access to fresh, locally-grown produce. Another community created a wellness initiative to support local employers. Other changes included expanded access to a school gymnasium to allow for a safe—and climate controlled—place to walk; the creation of walkability and bikeability maps; the construction of new sidewalks; and the connecting of trails to community attractions. Communities were also able to use the assessment data from their workbooks to obtain additional funding to support their obesity prevention efforts. One community received a Safe Routes to School grant, while another received a food assistance grant to support women, infants, and children.

Evaluation data showed that by the end of the capacity-building year, the five communities were more confident in their ability to conduct community assessments and use that data for planning purposes.

The Washington State Department of Health is currently working to build capacity within a second group of communities, and is developing ways to track policy development among grantees as well as other communities statewide. They have taken many of the lessons learned from the initial assessment trainings to increase community capacity for data collection and analysis to create greater impact on the local population.

It is this impact they are looking to expand as they move this initiative forward. As a result of providing guidance to communities that have the greatest needs, the Washington State Department of Health is finding that these communities are indeed able to take the reins and make some lasting changes. "21st century public health is focused on sustainability through policy, environmental and systems change work," said Mike Boysun, lead epidemiologist for the Department of Health's Tobacco Prevention and Control Program. "The Healthy Communities initiative in Washington supports low-capacity communities to do this work through an experiential learning model focused on quick wins and communities with the greatest disparities."



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