

HEALTH IMPACT STATEMENT



UTAH DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH

Healthy Living Through Environment
Policy and Improved Clinical Care (EPICC)

1422 1.4 Develop and/or Implement Community Plans to Promote Walking

I. Problem

Physical activity is essential for good health. Engagement in regular physical activity can lower the risk of diabetes, obesity, certain types of cancer, and may improve the management of existing chronic conditions. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently released Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, reinforcing the existing recommendation that adults engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity each week. While Utah is one of the most active states in the nation, only about half of Utah adults (55.3%; BRFSS 2013) met this recommendation in 2013. Walking and biking are favored forms of recreation in the state but there is considerable disparity in access to areas that are safe, accessible, and appropriate for various ability levels. Real and perceived crime, traffic hazards (such as high speeds and a lack of buffer zones between cars and pedestrians), and lack of environmental supports (such as crosswalks, complete and adequate sidewalks, and well-designed urban trails) can limit opportunities for walking as a major form of transportation and recreation. Cities and counties create community plans that define visions for their areas. These plans vary from municipality to municipality but can include policies to incorporate complete streets, bike lanes, expansion of pedestrian supports, and amenities such as street trees and benches that make the pedestrian environment more inviting. A scan of cities conducted in 2013 indicated that only 23 of the 243 incorporated municipalities in Utah had community plans that included policies or environmental supports for walking or biking. This lack of policies demonstrated a disconnect between public health and planning and highlighted a need to collaborate to create more walkable communities.

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II. Intervention

To address this need, the Utah Department of Health Healthy Living Through Environment, Policy, and Improved Clinical Care Program (EPICC) partnered with local health departments and other key state and local organizations to promote and support walkable communities. Partners in this effort included metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), the Utah Department of Transportation, and the Utah Transit Authority. This effort represented a true partnership between state, regional, public, private, and local organizations. EPICC staff provided training for partners, including local health department staff, on assessing neighborhood walkability and documenting violations of laws and ordinances that accommodate people with disabilities. EPICC staff trained local health department staff on

ways to increase involvement of underrepresented populations in the planning processes and provided examples of model municipal policies, such as Complete Streets (safe streets that support all forms of mobility). The local health department staff then worked directly with city and county planners in their districts. Resources and local health data, such as rates of physical activity, were shared with city planners, city council members, and other policy makers to demonstrate a need to enhance the walkability in their communities.

EPICC staff participated in long-term planning efforts at the state and regional level. Along with EPICC, local health department staff were especially instrumental in community planning processes and implementation of enhanced walkability. This process involved meeting with community planners over several years; building trust and demonstrating the value of public health involvement to elected officials; and working with mapping specialists, planning professionals, and engineers. Finally, EPICC staff worked with partners to develop a report showing the return on investment that increasing physical activity could have on the health of the population, the environment, and the economy. This type of data is vital in engaging with decision makers, as they identify priorities for making communities better and safer places to live. Transportation agencies have seen the impact on pedestrian safety and are beginning to include health and health data as part of the prioritization process for funding and implementation decisions.

III. Health Impact

As a result of the partnerships and relationships formed between public health professionals and city and county planners, by fall of 2018, more than 70 city plans, or chapters of master city plans, specifically addressed walking and biking. Partners demonstrated the importance of such policies and environmental changes by developing and joining several trails to form one continuous 120-mile trail. This trail is the longest paved, multi-use path separate from a roadway west of the Mississippi. Mirroring the historical completion of the transcontinental railroad in Utah with a “Golden Spike,” it was a natural culmination of these efforts to join these trails by a “Golden Spoke.” Utah Governor Herbert attended the event and pledged to create 1,000 miles of bike lanes/routes over the next 10 years. With the adoption of plans and policies that support walking in the community, the percentage of Utah adults who walked or biked to go from place to place at least once a week nearly doubled between 2010 and 2017, from 21.0 percent to 40.7 percent (Utah BRFSS 2010; 2017).

One city worked to increase the use of urban trails by connecting broken pathways, increasing the number of paved paths, and adding signage to improve interest and walkability. EPICC staff conducted intercept interviews with people using the renovated trail systems to identify the impact of these improvements. Trail users reported seeing more people using the trails since the improvements were made. Findings suggested that many of the users appreciated the greater connectivity that had been created. Several people remarked that improvements made it easier to get from place to place. One couple excitedly stated, “All the stuff within the community to try and get people not just on the trails but walking within the community is great. We love to cross the bridge and walk through town square, or walk up by the hill and the red cliffs.”