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News Release

UDOH to Promote Walking and Walkable Communities *Joins U.S. Surgeon General's initiative to "Step it Up!"*

(Salt Lake City, UT) – More Utahns than ever are being treated for heart disease and diabetes and the numbers continue to grow. Today, the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) joined with the U.S. Surgeon General to address these major public health challenges. *Step It Up! The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Walking and Walkable Communities* illustrates the health benefits of walking. However, many Utah communities lack safe and convenient places for individuals to walk.

While Utah may enjoy a reputation as being one of the healthier states in the nation, there is still room for improvement. Approximately 78% of Utah adults do not meet the recommended amounts of physical activity, with about 18% being sedentary. The UDOH Healthy Living through Environment, Policy, and Improved Clinical Care (EPICC) Program has partnered with transportation and planning organizations to assist communities in making changes at the neighborhood and street level that will make Utah cities and towns easy places to get around on foot or by wheelchair.

"Making healthy choices is easy when your environment supports you," said Brett McIff, physical activity coordinator for the UDOH EPICC Program. "But if walking down your street is difficult or scary, you and your children are not as likely to be active." A 2013 study by the U.S. Department of Transportation, for example, found that three out of every 10 Americans reported that no sidewalks existed along any streets in their neighborhood. In many communities, violence or the perception of violence may also prove a barrier to walking.

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“Everyone deserves to have a safe place to walk or wheelchair roll. But in too many of our communities, that is not the reality,” said Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the 19th U.S. Surgeon General. “We know that an active lifestyle is critical to achieving good overall health. And walking is a simple, effective, and affordable way to build physical activity into our lives. That is why we need to step it up as a country ensuring that everyone can choose to walk in their own communities.”

The UDOH EPICC Program encourages community planners and local leaders in Utah to create more areas for walking and wheelchair rolling and to prioritize the development of safe routes for children to get to and from schools. Designs should include sidewalks, curb cuts, crosswalks, safe crossings for the visually impaired, and more green space. The Surgeon General further called on city managers, law enforcement, and community and public health leaders to address safety concerns by better maintaining public spaces, ensuring proper street lighting, and neighborhood watch programs.

The Surgeon General’s report calls on individuals to make walking a priority in their lives. Fewer than half of all U.S. adults get enough physical activity to reduce their risk of chronic disease, and only a quarter of U.S. high school students get the recommended amount. Physical inactivity contributes to heart and lung disease, diabetes, and cancer, which account for 86% of our nation’s health care costs. Building walking into daily life can reduce disease and save money.

To read the Surgeon General’s Call to Action report and learn how to promote walking and walkable communities, visit www.surgeongeneral.gov.

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The mission of the Utah Department of Health is to protect the public's health through preventing avoidable illness, injury, disability and premature death, assuring access to affordable, quality health care, and promoting healthy lifestyles.