

Advancing Environmental and Policy Change to Promote Physical Activity through Multisectoral Collaborative Groups



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INTRODUCTION

Physical inactivity is recognized as one of the great public health challenges of the 21st century (1-3). Individual-level attempts to initiate and sustain changes in physical activity behavior are often unsuccessful in the absence of supportive physical and social environments (4). Attributes of the built environment (e.g., location of parks and recreation facilities, bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, transportation system), as well as policy directives (e.g., transportation policy, land use plans), can reduce barriers, promote active lifestyles, improve overall health, and potentially minimize related health disparities (5, 6).

Changing the built environment to facilitate active lifestyles requires cooperation and collaboration from diverse actors representing multiple sectors (7). National programs to promote active living recommend the formation of multisectoral groups (e.g., collaboratives, coalitions) in order to effectively address the broad scope of influences on lifestyles.

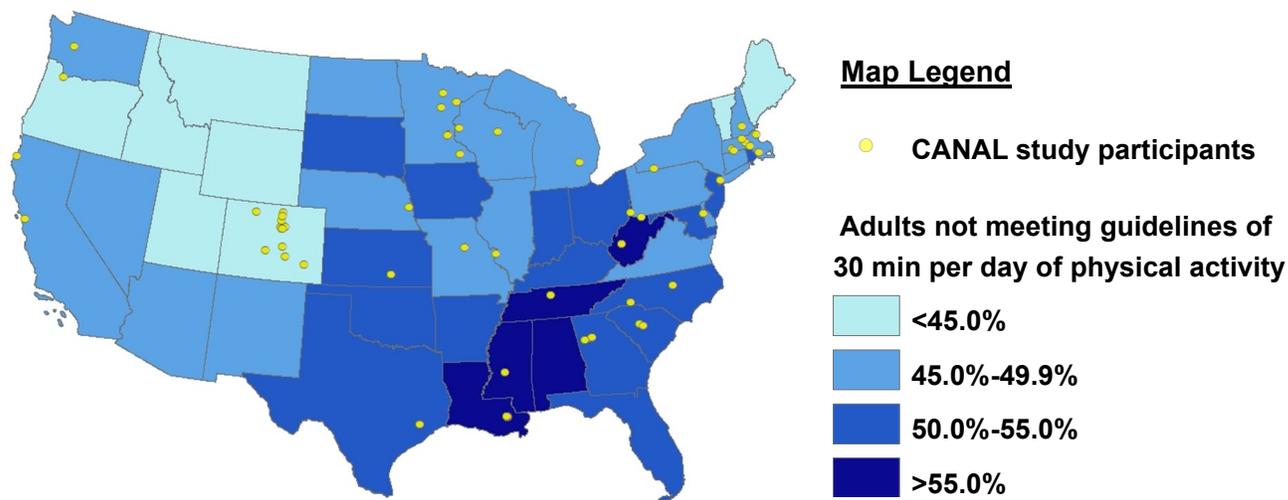
Successful multisectoral groups develop and maintain sustainable strategies to increase access to physical activity opportunities through leveraging resource, sharing knowledge, and building relationships (8). This brief describes active living groups' efforts to advance environmental and policy change (9).



Approach

- ◆ In 2011, 59 active living collaboratives from 22 states were interviewed for this study, as illustrated in map below.

Figure 1.



Key Findings

Most groups involve partners from multiple sectors, including planners, elected officials, public health experts, private entities (e.g., health care organizations), media, and non-profit organizations.

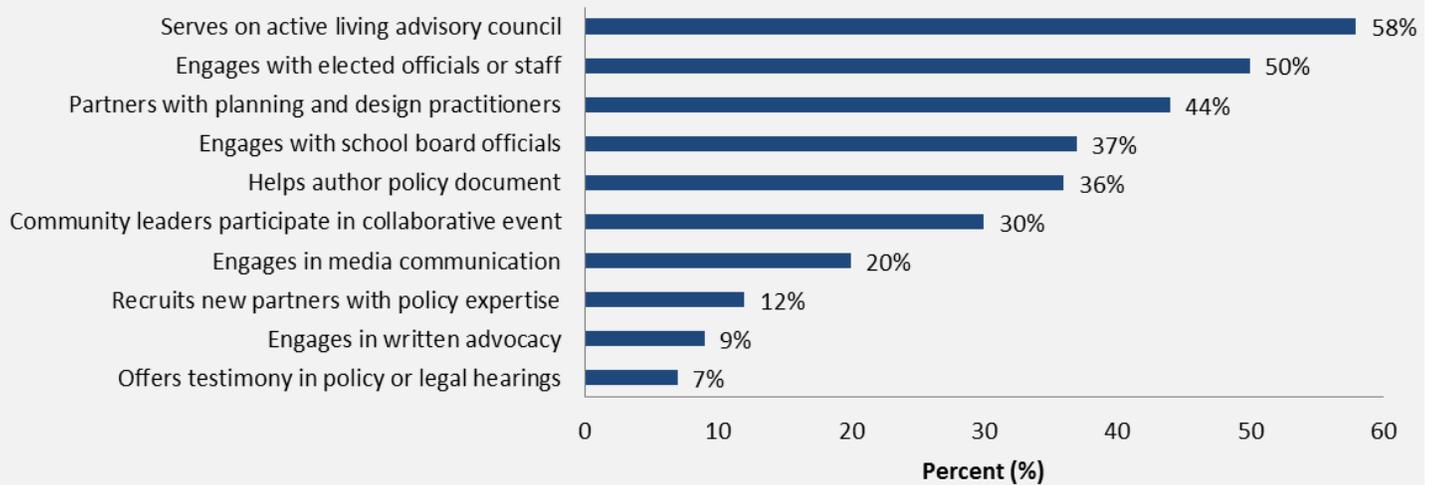
- ◆ Expertise within the collaboratives included: public and/or environmental health (95%); fitness and sport (83%); parks and recreation (83%); land use planning (80%); and transportation (76%).
- ◆ Only half of the groups reported media-related expertise (51%) and a smaller percentage reported expertise in law enforcement/safety (46%), housing (32%), and mental health (29%). Less than 10% reported working with experts in aging, mobility and accessibility.

Engaging community members and decision-makers is important for facilitating built environment improvements and related policy change.

- ◆ Most groups reported completing needs assessment activities (e.g., walkability and bikability audits) and supporting a variety of community events to inform collaborative initiatives and raise awareness about active living.

- ◆ Many groups served on councils or engaged with elected officials, but few produced written advocacy documents or testified in policy or legal hearings (Figure 2).

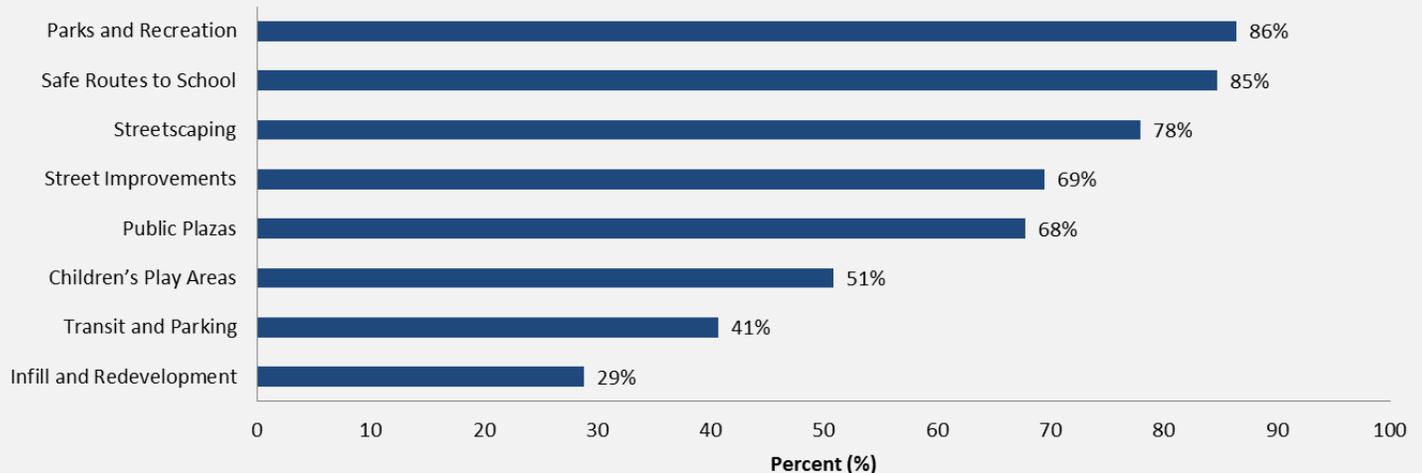
Figure 2. Percent of groups engaging in activities on very frequent or ongoing basis



Groups are making changes to the built environment and related policies.

- ◆ Groups were asked about eight areas of environmental improvement (listed below). Of these areas, groups reported working on an average of five areas (Figure 3).
- ◆ Projects included, but were not limited to: installation of bike racks, construction of walking paths and bike lanes, updates to existing policy documents (e.g., comprehensive plan, bike/ped plan), and development of new policy (e.g., complete streets resolution).

Figure 3. Percent of groups working in each improvement area

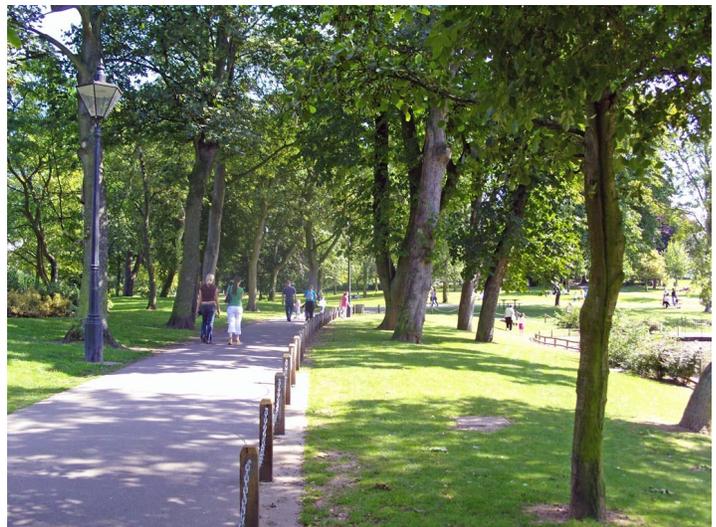


Achieving environmental and policy change requires time, social and political connections, and financial resources.

- ◆ Groups that more frequently described environmental improvements as in-progress or completed and who drafted or adopted policies shared the following characteristics:
 - ◆ Reported more years together as a group;
 - ◆ Secured more financial resources;
 - ◆ Engaged with media more frequently;
 - ◆ Partnered with planners more frequently; and
 - ◆ Used social marketing and social media.

Conclusion

- ◆ Groups that engaged in media communication, actively participated in the policy process, and engaged with the broader community of stakeholders reported greater policy and environmental change.
- ◆ Groups reported the most success in adopting policy in the areas of public plazas, street improvements, streetscaping, and parks and recreation. Complete Streets was frequently cited as a supporting policy for these areas.
- ◆ While many groups successfully worked on parks and recreation improvements, opportunities remain in other areas, including transit and infill and redevelopment. Additional time and resources may be critical to realizing these types of changes.



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