

Erin Murphy Walking College Fellow

To Help People Integrate Physical Activity In Their Daily Lives, Making Connections Is Key

That's what Erin Murphy does best. This dynamic 30-year-old public health professional in Lorain County, Ohio, connects people to safe places to walk and brings diverse teams of partners together to build better pathways, break down barriers to activity, and empower community leaders to get creative with their own unique walking programs. It's an important role in a place where disparate communities often feel left behind.

Murphy is on a mission to build cascading support for walkability among municipalities in Lorain County. Knowing that she needed a network of her own to gain inspiration and practical advice as she worked toward connecting communities with resources, Murphy applied for the Walking College and began her fellowship in May 2015.



From Advocate to Walking College Fellow

Murphy is a change agent in her field, helping people tap into creative solutions to systemic issues. In Lorain County, those issues include rapid suburban development on the fringes of Cleveland and lack of infrastructure in rural areas, with most municipalities prioritizing car travel over public transportation, walking and bicycling. Without safe and easily accessible places to be physically active, residents report that they just don't have the time or means to exercise. Murphy aims to change that, finding built environment-based solutions for the Lorain County General Health District.

Murphy's optimism stems in part from her own experience. She and her husband live in the Cleveland suburb of Lakewood in neighboring Cuyahoga County, in what is widely acknowledged as northeast Ohio's most walkable community. Lakewood has prioritized funding great infrastructure for active living, but strategic budget cuts have also provided an impetus for supporting walkable neighborhoods.

"They've actually done some articles about Lakewood because there are no school buses, for anybody," says Murphy. "It's true that it saves the school district money, but also they are big believers here in the social benefit that students get from walking to and from school. They have found it helps bond students. Maybe the only thing they have in common is that they live in the same neighborhood. But they end up talking and getting to know one another because they're walking the same route every day. They may not be best friends in school or sit at the same lunch table, but it still creates a cohort that learns to get along."

Having grown up in another walkable community that cut school bus service to save money, Murphy traces her enthusiasm for active living back to her roots. "Anybody who lived less than 3 miles from the school—which is actually a pretty significant amount of walking for a kid!—had to walk or get a ride," she recalls. "Growing up with a single parent who worked full-time, I mostly walked. I have a lot of positive memories from those experiences."

From Walking College to Walkable Communities

Murphy entered the Walking College with a project already in progress—applying for a grant to build better sidewalk connectivity in the town of North Ridgeville, which would enable children to walk to school safely and local residents to walk more often. Right away, America Walks program director and Walking College mentor Ian Thomas reminded her to take another look at her plan.

“Ian asked, ‘Well, do you know if the people in that neighborhood want a sidewalk?’” Murphy recalls. “Having that reminder to press pause and make sure you have input from those you’re serving is certainly something I learned about in my schooling, but it’s important to be reminded of. That was helpful in the progression of my project overall, getting some community feedback.”

The mentorship she received throughout her Walking College experience inspired Murphy to not just work more closely with community members on plans, but also to nurture and empower their leadership capabilities. She looks for the fire of motivation in citizens of the communities in which she works and latches onto it, encouraging them to take action. She tells them, “Look what you could do. The power is yours! I’m here to help you, but your decision makers want to hear from you more than me.”

Along with identifying natural leaders and opportunities for greater community engagement, Murphy also works with professionals across sectors, knitting together partnerships in the background to create long-term change. She found that the Walking College helped her facilitate those conversations with confidence.

“I do a lot of work with city and township administrations, and every time you are working on walking,” she says, “you find yourself in the same room having conversations with planners and engineers, parks and rec people – and having the background information to really be able to communicate in their language at least a little bit was really a benefit and helpful to me.”

While working with partners, Murphy regularly cites specific data on the benefits of enhancing walkability, which she learned in the Walking College. “I hadn’t really learned much before about the economic impact of walking and having walkable communities, so being able to reference some of those materials has allowed me to sprinkle some statistics in my conversations with mayors or elected officials,” she says. “That is what I continue to use in my work – being able to craft or tailor the message to different audiences.”

Building her skills and confidence through the Walking College helped Murphy broaden the reach of her initial project plan, too, shifting her focus from simple sidewalk connectivity in one community to facilitating a much larger conversation about active transportation.



Get Creative!



Murphy worked with the parks board and the public library in the village of LaGrange to install a “Storybook Stroll” along a new section of paved trail that was going in at the edge of a sports field in the community’s main park. Now, the park attracts families even when there aren’t softball games or other sporting events, inviting more uses and encouraging even young children to walk.

“We were able to spark a lot of conversation” with an array of collaborators, Murphy says. “While my project focused on a single community, at the county-wide level, we’re now working with partners to put together a county-wide active transportation plan. There is a local advocacy group here called M.O.V.E. [Mobility and Opportunity for a Vibrant Economy], and they’re focused on getting improved public transportation options in the county. After they saw some of the work we’ve been doing within communities, they reached out to us. We’re also working closely with our local Metro Parks and law enforcement. So now what we’re finding is all of these different entities coming together for one common cause. While someone’s focus is public transportation, someone else’s is recreation, someone’s is pedestrian and motorist safety, our focus is health, we all want residents to get from point A to point B easily and without incident, and we want them to be able to choose their mode of transportation. It’s trying to bring all of the people to the table to work on one county-wide plan in collaboration with our local MPO [Metropolitan Planning Organization] here.”

“While Lorain County may never look like San Francisco or Boston—and doesn’t have to there is still much that can be done to promote active transportation. Our goal at the health district is to make the healthy choice the easy choice.”

The collaboration is working well, and growing. “We’re having an active transportation summit in May [2017] where we’ve invited representatives to come, whether they’re community members, decision makers, engineers, planners, superintendents, or health care providers,” says Murphy. “It’s basically going to be a call to action. While you’re in your own little offices making plans, we’re going to be making big plans, and if we have your plans, that will help, because now we can connect all of them. It will help us strategize together for funding and leveraging of resources.”

Beyond the Classroom

While Murphy works on orchestrating big changes in Lorain County, she also draws on her Walking College experience to reflect on her own personal transportation choices. “One of the facts that was shared around was that 90% of the trips we make are less than a mile. In Cleveland, the weather does play a role in some seasons,” she laughs. “Someone shared a quote at the Walking Summit: ‘There’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing choices.’ I think I certainly have become a little more adventurous in making my own personal choices. Even when it’s 35 degrees, you can wear a coat and boots and a hat and you’ll be OK. So, some of those little snippets and sound bites definitely pop into my head frequently.”

To others wanting to create cross-community collaborations to facilitate more walkable environments, Murphy advises getting to know all of the stakeholders, learning to speak their language, and investing time in finding out about their existing priorities.

It is also essential to identify and encourage community champions who will support projects and local participants over time. “Identifying a community champion is very important, because again, at the end of the day, the mayor or city council is really going to care more about what their residents are saying, and not me,” Murphy says. “My preferences and my thoughts don’t matter as much to that elected official, because they are there to serve their constituents.”

Murphy’s projects have sparked significant changes in communities throughout Lorain County, paving the way for enthusiastic walking groups to populate new trails and sidewalks, for school districts and towns to enter into shared-use agreements to create family-centered walking experiences in school buildings, and much more. Armed with tips, tools and peer support from America Walks, she is helping to create a culture of activity in a changing county.