We at America Walks believe vehemently that even incremental interventions can add up to powerful change in our communities. It’s why, in partnership with the Every Body Walk! Collaborative, we launched our Micro Grant program in 2015, in the wake of the U.S. Surgeon General’s Call to Action to get Americans walking more. The program offers up to $1,500 for people and organizations working to make their communities more walkable through innovative, affordable projects and programs. Efforts funded through this initiative help to expand the prevalence of walking, add to the diversity of organizations working to improve walkability, and help to make walking safer, easier and more fun for all.

We are proud to report that the recipients of our second round of Micro Grant funding are showing how transformational seemingly small steps can be. Maps, murals, simple signage, and walking groups, among other endeavors, accomplished for relatively little cost, are adding up to big results for the 22 organizations that received funding in 2016. (Read the full list of recipients here.) It is our hope that they help to inspire further change in their communities and beyond.

To that end, here’s a sampling of the way our 2016 Micro Grant recipients are leveraging small grants to big gains:

**Wilkes-Barre Family YMCA, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania**

The Wilkes-Barre Family YMCA is using its Micro Grant funding to help entice transit users to walk more. In partnership with healthy communities coalition LiveWell Luzerne and the Luzerne County Transportation Agency, the YMCA has created in-bus transit ads advertising its free summer walking program, Y Walk Wednesdays.

The weekly, 90-minute evening walks kick off at 6 p.m., are led by local volunteers with expertise on particular topics, and are each centered on a theme — on the schedule this year are sessions focused on historic architecture, native plants, and the city’s Jewish heritage, to name a few. The walking program kicked off in June, when more than 230 people turned out for a walk led by a local historian and city council member focused on the history of Wilkes-Barre’s downtown. Read more about Y Walk Wednesdays here.

Organizers will next begin working with the Luzerne County Transit Agency on walkability surveys at high-demand bus stops to help improve walking safety and comfort nearby. According to officials, close to 80 percent of local transit riders have no other means of transportation outside of the public transit system. Officials have been inspired by the results of their work to-date to expand their efforts, and report they are now interested in conducting walkability audits around area churches, with a special emphasis on those with food pantries.
Opelousas Main Street, Inc., Opelousas, Louisiana

Opelousas Main Street is engaged in a variety of efforts to celebrate the culture and history of the city, which celebrates its 300th anniversary in 2020, and in the process, lure more people and investment to the most walkable section of town. Part of that quest involves bringing new vibrancy to the streets of the district, which the organization is addressing in part through public art.

Working with St. Landry Parish Government and with the help of a Micro Grant, the organization brought together artists and everyday members of the community to create a large mural spelling out the city’s name in a prominent spot downtown. Organizers believe that the mural along with related arts projects can add to the vibrancy of downtown, enrich its sense of place, and help foster community pride. This in turn, they expect, will draw more people and commercial interest downtown, increase foot traffic, and ultimately encourage more people to walk and bike for transportation.

The public art project is one of several city leaders hope will draw more people downtown. Inspired by the interest in the initial mural, organizers have since convened a paint-by-number community mural project that attracted over 60 participants and a third children’s community mural achieved with the help of the city’s Little Theater. These are in addition to striking piano key crosswalks striped in the city’s downtown in recent months, the most recent one carried out with the help of students in the Youth Leadership Program of the Chamber of Commerce, who came up with the idea to employ the state song “You Are My Sunshine” in the design.

Rogers Park Business Alliance, Rogers Park, Illinois

Rogers Park, located on the far northeast side of Chicago, is one of the most ethnically-diverse neighborhoods in the city. Rogers Park Business Alliance’s project combines public art and wayfinding to promote walking. The nonprofit economic development organization has developed a map – available in print and digital formats – of the expansive collection of public art to be found in Rogers Park as a way to encourage locals to get out and explore their community on two feet. They’ve also added wayfinding signage at key points around the neighborhood to make the public art walk program easier to navigate.

To-date, organizers have hired a photographer and designer to prepare the map for print and launched the interactive version of the tool on the business alliance’s website. They’ve also advertised the program and hosted a launch party and guided tours in June.

They believe they’ve tapped into something important with their project. “Remember that people yearn to be outside and have activities that are free, fun and engaging,” the group’s Sheree Moratto wrote in a progress update. “...Public art offers the opportunity to develop a simple and enriching experience for people, and since our public art installations are in walkable distance from each other, it is a perfect combination.”

Already, the project has inspired the business alliance to build on its effort. The organization will be incorporating wayfinding into more of its community development work in the future, Moratto says. And the group has leveraged interest in the public art walk to encourage local elected officials to make their annual bike ride a public art bike ride this year.