Creating Opportunities for Health for All Community Members

In 2017, America Walks, the National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD) and Lakeshore Foundation launched a new program aimed at supporting disability inclusion strategies that make healthier choices easier for all. The initiative, Designing for Inclusive Health, awards small grants to projects aimed at accelerating disability inclusion in walkability efforts by addressing environmental, programmatic and attitudinal barriers to health while expanding conceptions of pedestrianism.

One in 5 adults in the U.S. live with a disability and are at greater risk of health complications, due in large part to insufficient access to opportunity for physical activity and other everyday needs, according to Allison Hoit Tubbs, project coordinator at NCHPAD. “We need to start recognizing and including people with a disability as an underserved population,” she said, describing physical activity as an “essential ingredient for health.”

This initial round of grants yielded three awardees from across the country. America Walks, NCHPAD, and Lakeshore Foundation have enjoyed working with the grantees over the past year and have been excited by their progress. The results of their efforts to-date are profiled below.

**Access Portsmouth (Portsmouth, NH)**

In October 2015, Access Portsmouth launched as a web-based guide with accessibility information for restaurants and attractions in downtown Portsmouth, a historic port city of 22,000. Its tagline is “taking the mystery out of accessibility” and its goal is to raise awareness where it’s lacking, empower people, encourage a spirit of inclusiveness, and influence other communities to do the same.

The idea behind the group, sponsored by local architecture firm JSA Inc., was to help people who use wheelchairs stay connected to their nearly 400-year-old city whose brick sidewalks and historic buildings can prove difficult to navigate for anyone with mobility challenges. The work was inspired by personal experience. The group’s founder, Todd Hanson, is an architect and former marathon runner now living with a neuromuscular disease that has resulted in mobility limitations and the use of a wheelchair for ambulation. His own physical challenges have opened his eyes to the many obstacles even seemingly benign environmental impediments can present in his hometown.

The results of Access Portsmouth’s efforts have been been promising. In Portsmouth, wheelchair users and others are finding many buildings to be more accessible than they may have perceived, says the organization’s Anne Weidman.

The group is now adapting accessibility information into a Googlemaps-based, online application that will expand its reach and the addition of roll routes, user-tested and barrier-free loops are helping users of wheelchairs, strollers, as well as the general public travel around the historic downtown and waterfront.
Funds from the Designing for Inclusive Health grant were used to officially establish the organization as a nonprofit as well as toward development of a smart phone app, and for marketing materials to advertise the group’s new name, Access Navigators, in recognition of its expanded reach. The group has grown from its beta test site of Portsmouth to also include the New Hampshire towns of Exeter, Stratham, Hampton and North Hampton, with more in the planning. More information on this project is available in their own words here.

**Hanover County Health Department (Ashland, VA)**

In coordination with The Arc of Hanover, which serves individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the Chickahominy Health District, a division of the Hanover Health Department, was awarded a grant to assist in training volunteers to conduct walking and accessibility audits in the Town of Ashland, about 15 minutes north of Richmond in Hanover County, Virginia, and in Mechanicsville, a town of 36,000 southeast of Ashland.

The work was inspired by the organization’s mission to improve community health by disease prevention, promoting healthy lifestyles, and protecting residents from hazards. It was also spurred by a 2017 community health assessment process facilitated by the Hanover Health Department in partnership with a variety of local entities and residents, including the Arc of Hanover. This process revealed an opportunity for exploring accessibility needs in Hanover, where an estimated 95,000 residents ages 5 years and older have mobility challenges.

Organizers conducted focus groups with participants from the Arc of Hanover to help determine: 1) where they were currently walking and biking; 2) where preexisting safety concerns existed; 3) and where walking audits should be conducted. Four sites in Ashland and Mechanicsville were selected and volunteers of a variety of ages and abilities were recruited and trained in the use of the International Council on Active Aging auditing tool. The scores for each of the segments audited were averaged and the volunteers’ observations summarized.

The audits returned substantial opportunities for improvement at each of the locations targeted, highlighting important infrastructure that was inadequate or altogether missing in key locations. A document describing the audit findings will be included in the county’s Community Health Assessment report to help encourage environmental improvements that provide access to all residents to pursue active, healthy lifestyles. The Hanover Health Department has also presented the findings to planning and parks and recreation committees and is hoping to present the findings to the Hanover County Board of Supervisors.

Meantime, significant strides have been made in making Hanover County more accessible. For instance, the Town of Ashland recently updated its comprehensive plan and included complete streets language in the text. And the Hanover County Board of Supervisors is considering adding a new section titled Active and Healthy Living to its comprehensive plan. While the audits conducted as part of the Designing for Inclusive Health project are “one small piece of the puzzle,” in the words of Caitlin Hodge of the Chickahominy Health District, in terms of making her community more walkable, bikeable and accessible to all, Hodge sees one of the most promising results of her organization's project as the way it has brought together groups and individuals “who may not always think of each other as partners in the walkability or accessibility movement.”
Longer term, organizers hope that their work will spur improvements to the built environment that improve access on foot and by wheelchair for all county residents to everyday needs like grocery stores, schools and social services that will ultimately improve community health by giving rise to higher levels of physical activity, improved social connectedness, easier access to a variety of resources, and greater independence for people of all ability levels.

**Zeitgeist Center for Arts & Community (Duluth, MN)**

The Duluth Walkability Action Team within the Zeitgeist Center for Arts & Community was awarded a grant to work with the Commission on Disabilities to conduct tactical urbanism projects - low-cost and temporary changes to the environment - that raise awareness or demonstrate a solution to barriers that people with disabilities face in transporting themselves through their community. Currently, team members say the needs of people with mobility limitations are often overlooked in planning, designing, or building infrastructure. By using low-cost, community-led projects, the Walkability Action Team aims to demonstrate the need for such considerations at a time when many believe that significant improvements can only take shape through elaborate, costly, and expansive efforts. This series of projects intends to demonstrate that simple, low-cost measures can contribute to inclusive design.

The group has completed one demonstration project to date involving installation for six weeks of temporary curb extensions at an intersection adjacent to a senior living facility. Many of the residents of the facility walk regularly and report unsafe crossing conditions. Following the project, team members and city staff met with residents to evaluate the project. The team has also formalized a working group consisting of staff, public health professionals, community advocates, and members of the City of Duluth Commission on Disabilities. Moreover, the workgroup is planning the launch of a mobility campaign called Safe Sidewalks for Me with focuses on snow and ice clearance from sidewalks in winter and crosswalk yielding law during summer. The campaign, which will include a public service announcement, yard signs, and a photography exhibit, will employ personal stories from area residents. Team members plan to coordinate a media launch event to coincide with the anticipated adoption of an updated city comprehensive plan. The plan features policy priorities around snow removal, sidewalk clearance and street design as well as policies that slow cars and increase driver compliance with traffic laws.

**About America Walks**

America Walks, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit national organization is leading the way in empowering communities to create safe, accessible, and enjoyable walking conditions for all. We provide a voice for walking and walkable communities with federal agencies, provide strategy support, training and technical assistance to statewide, regional, and local organizations, and serve as the convener of the national Every Body Walk! Collaborative. Together, America Walks and the Every Body Walk! Collaborative boast 700 allied organizations who across the nation are working to increase walking and make America a better place to walk.

**About Lakeshore Foundation and National Center for Health, Physical Activity, and Disability**

Lakeshore Foundation’s activity, research and advocacy initiatives annually serve thousands of children and adults with physical disabilities and chronic health conditions. Located in Birmingham, Alabama, Lakeshore’s mission is based on the fact that physical activity is essential for individuals with physical disabilities to lead healthy, active and independent lives. Lakeshore’s adapted recreation, sport, fitness and aquatics programs serve people locally, nationally and internationally. Lakeshore is home to the CDC-funded National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD). Founded in 1999, NCHPAD is a public health practice and resource center on health promotion for people with disability. NCHPAD works to create health equity for people with disability by providing individualized information, referral and consultation services to people with disability, families, caregivers, policymakers, community members, health care practitioners and public health professionals through an array of web-based materials and health communication endeavors.