Here at America Walks, our success in creating safe, accessible, and enjoyable places to walk and be active stems from the strength of the thousands of community change agents who we work with across the United States. Join us in celebrating and sharing the stories of four Community Change Grant program recipients who are championing the walking movement with ingenuity around inclusion, safety, and fun.

The grant program provides $1,500 in funds to support grassroots efforts aimed at empowering communities to achieve local walkability. Now in its third year, the program has supported everything from new art to improved wayfinding, local events to school engagement projects. These are just four of the 27 projects that America Walks is funding with support from Cooper's Ferry Partnership via Get Healthy Camden, the Juliet Ashby Hillman Foundation, the National Center on Health, Physical Disability, Partners for Health Foundation, WalkBoston, and other partners of the Every Body Walk! Collaborative. The passion and creativity of these projects exemplifies the steadfast growth of the walking movement in making walking safer, more accessible, and more fun for all.

The Walking Bus: A Bridge to Life-Saving Lessons

A leading cause of death for kids 14 and under in the US is drowning. The Salvation Army Kroc Center in Camden, New Jersey is uniquely positioned to address this alarming reality with a critical piece of the puzzle, an accessible indoor pool. The other key to making it work? Walking. The Center is using its Community Change Grant on a Walking Bus, a safe, during and after-school walking opportunity that provides local students access to reduced-cost, quality after-school activity programs and life-saving swim lessons.

“Traditional transportation options weren’t working. Walking makes it work”, says Benjamin Ovadia, Resource Development Manager at The Salvation Army.

30 kids have joined the walking bus for after-school, 27 of whom had no previous access to the programs because of transportation issues. Trained program staff meet students at their respective schools and head out on a three-stop route to the center. Beyond walking, kids participate in a variety of arts, math and literacy, S.T.E.M., and fitness and wellness activities, along with getting homework assistance and dinner. Given the success of the after-school Walking Bus, a nearby school arranged for its own staff to bring 21 kids to swim lessons (four sessions each) during the school day.
The Walking Bus’ presence in the community has created a connectedness centered around walkability. Traffic-calming crossing guards help at high-speed areas, local businesses offer access to shelter in case of emergency, and a fruit stand owner gifts the kids free snacks. The grant has also inspired conversations with local leaders and partners around walkability, parks, access, and green spaces. Kroc Center staff utilized network-expanding partnership opportunities, targeted outreach campaigns, and pedestrian-first safety trainings when planning the Walking Bus to ensure it was inclusive and accommodating to students of all backgrounds and abilities. They plan to replicate this new walking model and scale it to expand their services to an even greater number of students next year.

**Safe Routes to School’s Middle School Student Takeover**

A great way to get middle school students to walk more and invest in walkability issues facing their generation? Give them the tools to become their own best leaders. The City of Cupertino Safe Routes to School program in California is doing just that by allocating their Community Change Grant to three different middle schools in the district. Events to encourage walking, like on-campus walking and biking activities, are underway and the students are leading the events.

At one of the three recipient schools, Kennedy Middle School, a self-started group called the JFK Green Commuters has hosted several walking encouragement days and an English as a Second Language Class is planning a big Walk to School Day event this fall. The students have spearheaded peer-to-peer tabling events on campus several times in the last month to spread the word to over 100 students about why alternative transportation such as walking and biking is important. The students have decided to creatively incentivize upcoming events with raffle items and other prizes.

Students are not the only ones learning something new and engaging around these topics. At a recent presentation on Safe Routes to School, Cupertino Mayor Darcy Paul attended Kelly Middle School students tabling a walking encouragement event.

**Dozens of Participants Walk Across Alabama**

Shoals Community Clinic is no stranger to hosting walking challenges, but nothing has moved the needle quite like this year’s Walk Across Alabama, funded by the Community Change Grant from America Walks. The purpose of the program was to challenge participants to set incremental goals in a supportive group setting. The goals, to have each person walk 10 miles in 10 weeks, added up to accomplishing the namesake of “A Walk Across Alabama”.

“East to west is roughly 200 miles, north to south about 300 miles... we actually almost doubled both of those so we almost walked across and up and down twice,” says Bonita McCay, Executive Director of Shoals Community Clinic.

*Kelly Middle School students tabling a walking encouragement event.*

*Participants explored local parks and trails as they got their steps in.*
McCay cites the cultivation of fun activities, social support, and incentives as being a game-changer for the group’s success in smashing its goals. They provided evidence-based guidance with wellness, nutritional, and walkability coaching from nearby university students, and free pedometers and journals for tracking daily mileage. Shoals Community Clinic hosted weekly group walks at an indoor track, and partnered with an outdoor hiking group called Fresh Air Family to facilitate beautiful outdoor walks on weekends. Over half the people who registered started with a baseline of less than one day a week of exercise. By the end, everyone was exercising at least once a week.

**Making Community Trail Maps a High Point**

In City of High Point, North Carolina, city staff took notice that community members were sometimes using unsafe walking routes along busy roads despite better alternatives being available. A group applied for a Community Change grant to develop maps and signage to promote the city’s safe, enjoyable, and accessible walking trails.

“A lot of us are blessed with transportation. You don’t think about it until it really comes into your vision. We’re now thinking from a walking perspective,” says Caitlin Maressa, AmeriCorps VISTA! working for the City of High Point.

Working closely with City of High Point’s Library Director and the Parks and Recreation Department, Maressa’s goal is to visually highlight the walking trails that already exist but are sometimes forgotten. The focus is on creating visibility and education around the trails system while promoting the benefits of walking.

The city plans to launch the maps in July with a kick-off event that incorporates a walking group, door-to-door outreach to energize the community, helpful handouts from city health and wellness programs, and a presentation on why walking, and bolstering walkability in the community, is key for individual and community health. The grant has opened up new networks so the city can work collaboratively on other innovative, inclusive, walkability-driven projects in the future.

**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.

The Community Change grant program awards funds to help catalyze smaller-scale, low-cost projects and programs that increase the prevalence of walking, expand the diversity of people and organizations working to advance walkability, and help to make walking safer, easier, and more fun for all community members.