On November 20th, 2019, America Walks hosted the webinar, “Beyond the Physical: Mental and Social Benefits of Walkable Communities”, where we explored the myriad of benefits of walking that extend beyond our individual physical health, like our minds and interpersonal relationships.

It featured Jasmin Tahmaseb McConatha, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at West Chester University of PA, Suzanne Nienaber, AICP, the Partnerships Director at the Center for Active Design, and Dr. Shannon Rogers, the State Specialist of Nature Based Economic Development on the Community and Economic Development Team at the University of New Hampshire’s Cooperative Extension. Our inspiring panelists shared their own experiences, research and lessons in how walking, walkability and creating walkable and movable neighborhoods are associated with social connectedness and a positive sense of well-being.

America Walks received many questions and comments from attendees. All three of our panelists took time to offer their expert answers, to continue the conversation and provide further insight on the mental and social benefits correlated with walking and walkability.

**On the location and site scale, what is considered ideal for locations that community can walk to and have access to?**

**Jasmin:** There is no particular one size and scale.

**Suzanne:** Parks and public spaces; civic assets like libraries/community centers/schools/cultural amenities; grocery, retail, and commercial areas. Ideally within 10-15 min walk.

**Shannon:** If I understand correctly, what I’ve read is that a 5-10 minute walk is what folks are willing to do. In terms of an ideal # of locations to walk to, this is a great question and I haven’t seen any literature on it. In our research 10 locations was the average for the walkable neighborhoods. I think it also depends on what those locations are. A good mix of daily needs and community spaces would be ideal for sustainability. See [Walkscore.com](http://Walkscore.com).

**Conversely, I’m curious about the inclination to physical activity and walking in colder climates such as upstate NY. It’s difficult to walk during much of the year here, even for a healthy, able-bodied person, let alone someone with a disability. I’m wondering how can you promote this type of connectivity in ways besides walking during winter months?**

**Jasmin:** That is a serious concern, there are often walking possibilities in malls or other indoor places.

**Suzanne:** Many public spaces remain active year round. Indoor walking paths provide another option for winter. [See Buffalo Wintermission](http://SeBluffaloWintermission).
Shannon: Great question. We saw the same things in NH. We surveyed during the summer but folks talked about the challenges during the winter. Keeping sidewalks clear and ice free is a major issue but can help facilitate more walking.

**What is the best advice you have for small communities dealing with high snow and ice beyond salting and clearing walk space?**

Jasmin: If even a small area around a park is cleaned or an indoor area, those can serve as a walking area in the winter.

Suzanne: See above answer. Consider skating opportunities, and indoor walking trails.

Shannon: Sharing information on alternate routes that are the most clear and have snowbanks lowered can help. Durham, NH (fairly small college town) has a strong commitment to keeping the sidewalks cleared and often the sidewalk is cleared before some roads! There is also a town email list that provides information on this info. But wearing bright colors, blinking lights on backpacks, and yaktracks help too. I'm sure there have been studies but I don't have any to recommend off the top of my head.

We're a small town (pop. 14,900) in a semi-rural area and were were funded to do a conceptual design for a rehabilitative nature trail in 9 acres of conservation land. Are there municipal/healthcare system partnership models we can look at for multi sector investment in health promoting nature based built environments?

Jasmin: I would recommend the local AARP and the WHO which has helpful ideas.

Suzanne: Rails to Trails conservancy offers case studies that may be helpful.

Shannon: Morehead Kentucky has very collaborative Trail Town Task force that consists of healthcare reps, volunteers, tourism staff, and University partners. It would be an interesting model to look at.

**Some people think that trees and greenery allows more crime due to the ability to hide. Is there any grounds to be concerned about this in small rural communities?**

Jasmin: I do not believe so, lighting and trimming is helpful.

Suzanne: Generally speaking, significant health benefits of greenery and community beautification would outweigh crime concerns. However, note importance of maintenance, lighting, public space programming and activation in enhancing perceptions of safety.

Lack of perceived safety is always a very common comment for low utilization of public space in our communities. Any suggested resources for tackling this issue?

Jasmin: Lighting and cameras and community awareness.

Shannon: Strong partnerships with law enforcement & community groups to make sure spaces are maintained and there are more eyes on these areas are the recommendations I've heard.
**How are cities tackling tree canopy? trees add value but funding is tight for maintenance and staff capacity**

**Jasmin:** Community projects of tree planting is very helpful, small trees are inexpensive, fundraising activities, or planting trees for a deceased family member.

**Suzanne:** The Children & Nature Network has a number of great resources around trees and greenery. Here’s a link to a few: [https://www.childrenandnature.org/?search=main&s=trees](https://www.childrenandnature.org/?search=main&s=trees)

**Shannon:** I don't have a lot of an answer but have a resource to help understand the economic argument: [https://www.itreetools.org/](https://www.itreetools.org/).

**Can you share information on models or approaches for including older adults and persons with disabilities who use walkers and wheelchairs into walkability initiatives in parks?**

**Jasmin:** AARP website has excellent resources on this area.

**The benefits of walking and civic engagement are clear. How do we encourage healthcare to take a more active role in promoting the use of public spaces to support health?**

**Jasmin:** Intergenerational programs and mentoring are helpful, also continuing to raise awareness that even a little helps a lot.

**Do you have any resources you'd recommend for more rural or small town areas looking to invest in walkable infrastructure (especially for areas where walkability is still seen as, for lack of a better word, elitist or a "nice to have but not necessary")?**

**Jasmin:** I would recommend the AARP website or community engagement person, they are very helpful.

**Can you share examples of walkability initiatives that bridge youth and older adults? Fostering intergenerational activities that promote outdoor connectivity would have many benefits for both groups.**

**Jasmin:** Partnering with a high school or university would be helpful, intergenerational mutual mentoring helps.

**Do you know of any regional pilot programs where two or more communities have gotten together to create a walkable program?**

**Jasmin:** I don’t have any specifics that come to mind but I would check with the AARP website.

**Shannon:** [Trail Town programs](https://www.americawalks.org/trail-towns) across the country are a neat model.
If only a part of a city is walkable, do people from less walkable neighborhoods travel to more walkable neighborhoods to walk? From a city perspective, how important is the distribution of walkability versus creating high quality walkability in select areas?

**Shannon:** Interesting question. Our research showed that there were benefits to have walkability in your own neighborhood and thus would suggest that efforts should be made to create as much walkability as possible in every part of a community where it is feasible.

**Suzanne:** Consistent walkability is key for supporting more engaged, socially connected communities where everyone has full access to community resources. Disparities can reinforce persistent inequities -- e.g. neighborhoods with sidewalks in disrepair; or neighborhoods where a lack of sidewalks is intentionally meant to exclude.

**What are the 9 communities piloting Fitwel?**

**Suzanne:** [See this press release.](#)

**Will Suzanne explain the funding / how this came to be again. Phil Knight foundation + a National Housing/health group?**

**Suzanne:** Assembly initiative was funding by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.