

STORIES FROM THE WALKING COLLEGE: KELLI MCINTYRE

2016 WALKING COLLEGE FELLOW
HEALTH JUSTICE AND LIVABILITY PROJECTS MANAGER
WITH PHILADELPHIA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Public Health: People-Centered, Value-Based

With a B.S. in Athletic Training from Boston University and an M.A. in Exercise and Sport Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Kelli McIntyre has always been passionate about health and safety. She's also passionate about human rights, social justice, and health equity. In 2016, when she participated in the Walking College, Kelli was the Physical Activity Coordinator for the Division of Chronic Disease Prevention at the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH), focusing her work on physical activity promotion and combatting barriers to active living. Since then, her role has shifted, and she is now the department's Health Justice and Livability Projects Manager, as well as working part-time as the Communications Associate for America Walks.

Learning the Language of Walkability

For more than six years, Kelli's work has involved identifying and connecting people to free and low-cost opportunities to be active and striving towards a more equitable distribution of safe opportunities for joyful movement.

"Connecting the dots between walkability, safety, and authentic engagement, I hope to be an instrument of transformative change in my city. I recognize that the conversation about a more walkable Philadelphia is as much about economic opportunities and inclusion in the decision making, as it is about sidewalks and traffic calming. We need to talk about intentionally addressing decades of active disinvestment in racialized communities."





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Livable Communities and Health Justice

Back in 2016 Kelli decided to apply for a Walking College Fellowship after participating in a walk audit in South Philly. Having now learned the language of walkability and different methods of assessment, Kelli now has trouble walking anywhere without constantly analyzing the environment for safety features and amenities for people walking. Observational walks in different neighborhoods also made it clear to her how decisions about investments and distribution of funds end up influencing public health.

Recently, Kelli’s title changed to Health Justice and Livability Projects Manager for the PDPH, reflecting her transition to addressing not only physical activity outcomes but more broadly livable communities and defining a health justice approach to the work. In this new role, she has focused on how inclusive community design can support active living, provide access to nourishing food, opportunities for education and employment, transportation options, healthcare, green space, community safety and more—all the aspects of a community that make it livable.

At the same time, Kelli and her team are working to demonstrate the value of lived experience and narratives as evidence and practicing centering real people who are experts in their communities in the understanding of public health issues.

Ultimately, the team hopes to include these "experts" in the decision-making.

Kelli McIntyre's experience in the Walking College and her Walking Action Plan have helped shape her evolving work in promoting safe, livable, and just communities in Philadelphia. Her team has developed partnerships with nonprofit organizations to engage Philadelphians in walking, walkable community assessment, and pedestrian advocacy. These partnerships include such organizations as Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha (APM), Fairmount Park Conservancy, Clean Air Council, and more. Together, they have provided resources that engage people in walking, engage them in the conversation about assets and opportunities in the pedestrian environment, and support people in joyful use of public spaces. One of the greatest successes of this work is the creation of We Walk PHL- a program of over a thousand people created in partnership with the Fairmount Park Conservancy and Philadelphia Parks and Recreation to establish community-led walking groups in as many as 15 parks around the city.

Some of the biggest challenges to walkability in Philadelphia are the age and troublesome history of the city of Philadelphia itself. In her own words, *"Philadelphia is a very old city, with old infrastructure and a long history of harm toward its Black and brown residents. After the industrial revolution, much of the city's once-booming factories and neighborhoods were left vacant. Abandoned properties, vacant land, pervasive litter and dumping, and violence are deterrents to walking for many Philadelphians. Although we have many high-quality recreational amenities, most are not in the communities with the highest need. In fact, the communities that have no trails or limited access green space, are the same communities with the highest prevalence of chronic conditions, violence, poverty, and unemployment."* Thus, addressing today's issues of inequity in a city with such a long history of racial segregation has proven difficult. But Kelli remains patient and hopeful. Though bridging the divide between communities and government is challenging, Kelli believes that *"authentic engagement can lead to advocacy which can lead to community change."*

Kelli's vision for Philadelphia is *"a city that treats every resident with dignity and respect, where we value and engage our most important resources—our people."* She envisions a process that begins with a community conversation, continues with people identifying community needs and vision, and results in cleaner and safer streets and increased opportunities for joyful movement. Her hope is that all Philadelphians will feel good about walking and moving in their own community, letting their children play outside, and interacting and being active with their neighbors. *"My vision is that we begin to embody our nickname and become the City of Brotherly Love- through walking and moving together."*

From Health Equity to Health Justice

One of the ways Kelli's work has changed over the years is a shift from a focus on "health equity" to "health justice." Whereas the goal of health equity is to make sure that everyone has what they need to achieve health, health justice requires acknowledgment of historical harms and seeks to address the root causes of public health problems.

For Kelli, public health is her third career path, but it feels like home. In fact, after completing the Walking College, she was inspired to return to school for a Master's in Public Health and was accepted into the inaugural class of fellows for the Bloomberg American Health Initiative at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health.

She shares her deep sense of purpose that she gets from the work. With the support of the Division's Health Justice Team, which informs policies, practices, and programs, she works to apply an anti-racist lens to public health, do authentic community engagement, and establish shared accountability.

She has helped her team to challenge their own understanding, language, and framing of public health issues, establish shared values to guide the work, and now they are working to operationalize those values.

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For instance, when the PDPH established the Division of COVID Containment, in response to the pandemic, the department used a tool created through the health justice work, a hiring toolkit, which centers values and identifies biases, in order to attract and identify candidates that are representative of the Philadelphia community.

For Kelli McIntyre, a positive outcome of the pandemic is that people are more aware of the critical nature of housing, community safety, and access to food and spaces for active living. She is glad that now *“public health is out of the shadows. People are beginning to recognize the everyday public health interventions all around them and see that public health doesn’t happen just in the health department; it happens in the whole community and in all departments of government. Everyone has a responsibility and role to play in protecting the health of our communities.”*



AMERICA WALKS