



**SpotLight #12**  
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## **Community Funding Strategies to Foster Active Living: The Prevention Minnesota Initiative to Improve Health Outcomes**

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### **Prevention Minnesota: Improving the Health of Minnesotans**

Prevention Minnesota is Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota's unprecedented, multi-year initiative to tackle heart disease and preventable cancer in Minnesota. Under the auspices of its Center for Prevention, Blue Cross aims to achieve its ambitious goals by tackling major root causes of preventable disease—tobacco use, physical inactivity, and unhealthy eating. Founded in 1998 and funded with proceeds from Blue Cross' landmark legal settlement with the tobacco industry, the Center for Prevention employs a comprehensive, science-based approach that includes community funding, technical assistance, clinical strategies, outreach to high-risk groups, public awareness campaigns, workplace strategies, and health behavior change services for individuals. This SpotLight focuses on the Center's community funding efforts to spread active living principles and achieve positive health outcomes among Minnesota residents.

### **Active Living: Changing Community Mindsets**

Prevention Minnesota is charting new territory with a novel effort to increase statewide physical activity levels: a targeted program to support communities in the development of "active living" community design. Popularized by the Active Living by Design program at the University of North Carolina, "active living" refers to a lifestyle that seamlessly integrates physical activity into daily routines, not only through recreation but also in daily tasks such as commuting to work and running errands. Communities can support and encourage physical activity in many ways, including thoughtful land use policies, changes in the built environment and transportation systems, and the creation of walking paths, parks, and greenways.

Building on this concept, community funding to support active living design is one of Prevention Minnesota's most innovative efforts to increase physical activity in Minnesota. The funding opportunities that Blue Cross has developed within this program help

communities realize their potential as agents of change in ensuring that residents are able to readily incorporate physical activity into their daily lives. These funding opportunities—with a first round of RFPs launched in mid-2006—provide critical assistance to communities as they envision and create development plans that support important physical activity goals.

Since last year, Prevention Minnesota has awarded almost \$1 million in active living-related contracts to 14 urban, suburban, and rural communities across the state. Communities are selected based on their demonstrated commitment to the principles of active living, as evidenced in an extensive funding proposal they are required to submit; the commitment of elected officials to participate actively in the program; the recruitment of an array of community partners; and the capacity to affect meaningful change in the physical activity behaviors of their residents. The goal is to respond to the most promising proposals, and also to create geographic diversity so as to begin building statewide awareness about the principles of active living. Active Living contracts fall into two categories: Community Assessment and Engagement, and Active Community Planning.

### **Community Assessment and Engagement**

The Community Assessment and Engagement component of Prevention Minnesota funding helps communities explore at the conceptual level the role that active living principles can play in shaping local development. By bringing together elected officials and key community stakeholders to discuss visions for a more active future, this funding helps pave the way for actual community change that reflects the healthful principles of active living. Governmental agencies at the city or county level are eligible to receive this financial support to allow them to begin assessing in a very in-depth manner the role that active living can play in shaping their local policies and ordinances.

To bolster the significance of these stakeholder discussions, funding recipients also conduct community assessments, develop a strategic plan to direct change efforts, and implement activities that promote community awareness about the importance of active living. With the support of Blue Cross, two major counties in the Twin Cities metropolitan area are currently working on this assessment and engagement effort. A contiguous group of four counties in northern Minnesota is the third assessment and engagement awardee.

To support communities as they begin this exciting process, Prevention Minnesota is providing individualized technical assistance from an expert in the field. Active Living by Design, mentioned above, has been engaged to establish and evaluate local approaches to active living. Together, funded communities and the expert technical assistance providers from Active Living by Design construct a clear vision that directs local development efforts. Then the communities rally local support for the implementation of active living principles. The ultimate aim is to transfer important, hands-on skills to communities themselves and thereby build local capacity to create environments that promote physical activity.

### **Active Community Planning**

Communities that are poised to begin the hands-on process of instituting change can also receive support from Blue Cross. Funded communities in this category focus on either

municipal planning, emphasizing issues such as land use and transportation, or on pedestrian/bicycle planning, which creates opportunities for non-motorized transportation throughout the community. By the close of the funding period, communities will have developed concrete plans specifically designed to encourage active lifestyles among residents. Programs within these communities have ranged from a rural initiative that created local walking and biking paths to an urban effort that developed training opportunities about how to incorporate active living principles into community design for city employees.

As these communities begin to confront the challenges of adapting local plans and ordinances to embrace the goals of active living, Prevention Minnesota also offers the support of a technical assistance provider with extensive expertise in active living and community planning. Ann Forsyth, director of the Metropolitan Design Center and an acclaimed Urban Design professor at the University of Minnesota, is a leader in the fields of smart growth and urban planning. As the technical assistance provider for these funding recipients, Dr. Forsyth works closely with participating communities to provide training and offer a custom library of planning tools that will assist in the implementation of active living principles. Examples of these tools can be found at [www.designforhealth.net](http://www.designforhealth.net).

### **A Comprehensive Approach**

Active living funding is just one component in a broad range of Blue Cross' Prevention Minnesota health initiatives designed to help Minnesotans become more active. One of the most visible efforts to date is the innovative *do*® campaign, which reaches the community through an upbeat series of multimedia images that encourage adults to engage in 10 minutes of physical activity, three times daily. This important and highly engaging effort transmits realistic health goals and relays important messages about physical activity while still managing to remain fun and accessible. Additional information about *do*® is available at [www.do-groove.com](http://www.do-groove.com).<sup>1</sup>

Communities on the Move, another Prevention Minnesota funding initiative, supports local organizations that create opportunities for adults to become more physically active. By funding opportunities to combine social support and physical activity for adults (such as walking clubs, aerobics classes, and 5K training programs for new runners) these contracts enable communities to develop innovative, engaging programs that tangibly improve the health of residents. Funding programs that support worksite-based physical activity and are also planned for the future.

As part of Blue Cross' comprehensive approach to help Minnesotans become more active, Prevention Minnesota creates links between various funding programs. Even at the most modest funding levels for the Communities on the Move program, for instance, organizations are encouraged to get participants interested and involved in community planning and broader approaches to active living.

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<sup>1</sup> *do*® is a registered trademark of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota.

## Bringing All the Pieces Together

The first funding recipients are in the early stages of their work, yet the support and assistance Blue Cross is providing can already be seen. Most notably, dialogues about community design and active living principles are starting to occur in new and dramatic ways. As an example, for the first time a major planning department in the Twin Cities area is consulting with its health department on the implications of a motorized transportation plan on *non-motorized* transportation routes. The new awareness of the overarching community benefit is a great step forward in planning in that community. Similarly, because of the shared training that Blue Cross is providing to a group of adjoining Twin Cities communities, those communities have begun a conversation about how they can work together to develop a seamless network of biking and walking paths covering an expansive area in the metropolitan region. In many cases, the funding has also brought to life plans and ambitions that elected officials or planners have been visualizing without the resources to engage in specific planning. In fact, Blue Cross support has helped a group of elected officials to become true leaders in their communities around active living and also provided the added resources to allow city planners to recruit the very best experts in developing or assessing their community design plans.

Prevention Minnesota's work extends beyond community funding. Indeed, Prevention Minnesota actively strives to create far-reaching public and private partnerships in support of active living throughout the state. Ongoing dialogues with diverse partners provide opportunities to create shared agendas based on common goals. In this spirit, the Center for Prevention also sponsors speakers to provide an active living community planning perspective at relevant conferences. Recent collaborative partners in such efforts include the Regional Council of Mayors (which serves the greater Twin Cities metropolitan area), the Minnesota chapter of the American Planning Association, city councils throughout the state, and numerous representatives of Minnesota's philanthropic and private sectors.

## Resources

Additional information about Prevention Minnesota is available at [www.bluecrossmn.com/preventionminnesota](http://www.bluecrossmn.com/preventionminnesota).