

Montana Cities and Counties Working to Build Health into Community Design

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At A Glance

Communities across Montana are learning how to improve access to physical activity through the Building Active Communities Initiative (BACI). BACI is a project of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS). The initiative provides community leaders and city planners with training and technical assistance to create healthier built environments. As of August 2016, nine communities have committed to designing streets, sidewalks, bike lanes, parks, and trails that will help people be more physically active.



Public Health Challenge

According to 2014 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System data, 3 out of every 5 Montana adults are either overweight or obese. Being overweight or obese can lead to many serious diseases and health conditions, including high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, stroke, heart disease, and some cancers. Although regular physical activity can help reduce these health risks, not all people live in places where they can safely walk, run, bike, or be

active on a daily basis. This is especially true for low-income and rural populations, who are more likely to be inactive and have poorer access to active transportation and recreation opportunities than more urban areas. Results of an evaluation conducted with BACI communities revealed that particularly in small rural places, local leadership buy-in and community engagement are necessary factors for success.

Find Out More

To learn more about Montana's Building Active Communities Initiative, visit <http://www.umt.edu/sell/cps/baci/> This project is supported by the State Public Health Actions to Prevent and Control Diabetes, Heart Disease, Obesity, and Associated Risk Factors and Promote School Health cooperative agreement (DP13-1305).

The BACI initiative is a critical part of implementing our city's Downtown Master Plan. BACI has energized several talented young professionals, including one with disabilities, to get involved and develop options for everyone in our community.

- Bill Bronson, Great Falls city commissioner

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Approach

The state health department started BACI to help Montana's community leaders and city planners learn how to create or enhance environments that support active living. DPHHS partnered with multiple state agencies and community organizations that could help provide training, educational resources, and technical assistance. Through BACI, the partners introduced communities to complete streets concepts and other design strategies that make it easier for people of all ages and abilities to safely walk, bike, or use public transportation. They also conducted follow-up calls, webinars, and site visits to assist participating communities with developing and implementing BACI action plans.

Results

As of August 2016, many Montana communities have received education and technical assistance from BACI about design strategies to help increase access to safe, routine opportunities for physical activity. Of the 16 communities that attended a BACI 2-day Action Institute, 7 cities and 2 counties adopted complete streets resolutions or active transportation plans. This means approximately 119,372 residents, or 12% of Montana's population, will have safer, more accessible streets, sidewalks, bike lanes, and trails to support active living. In 2014, the National Complete Streets Coalition ranked Montana's Dawson County complete streets policy 3rd in the nation out of 70 policies passed that year. In 2016, 9 communities returned to attend BACI 2.0 that focused on community engagement and low-cost strategies to improve active living.

What's Next

To ensure success moving forward, all cities that participate in BACI agree to complete periodic progress reports and evaluations. In turn, BACI partners and advisors provide follow-up technical assistance calls and site visits as needed. DPHHS reports that three additional cities have complete streets policies or active transportation plans in development. Two are expected to be adopted by the end of 2016, which could affect an additional 8,482 Montana residents. Moving forward, BACI will strengthen its partnerships with state agencies and organizations and continue to provide educational outreach to communities across the state interested in learning how to create healthier built environments.