



# Footprints to Health Community Case Study: Safe Routes to School and Transportation Planning

## Background

The *Marathon County Community Health Assessment 2003- 2005; A Summary Report of Marathon County's Key Health Priorities* identified obesity and it's related disorders as one of its priorities. The community task force leading the assessment process made the commitment to create action teams to address the health priorities. A forum was held to identify partners and begin planning for action. The people interested in the obesity priority formed a coalition, defined their purpose, identified nutrition and physical activity as the foci, and selected **Healthy Eating Active Living** as the name of the newly formed group. Three population groups were selected as targeted areas. They were: Youth and Schools, Adults and Workplaces, and the Built Community Environment.

## Methods

The first actions of the coalition were targeted to the area of Youth and Schools. Grant funds were secured to implement the School Health Index tool in eight schools in four districts. Later, the HEAL Coalition was selected to be the Coalition to implement a pilot program with the WI Department of Health Services Nutrition and Physical Activity Program. This pilot program targeted the Franklin School neighborhood using the socio-ecological model and included an emphasis on the walkability and bikeability of the neighborhood.

One of the reasons Franklin school was selected was its location. It is in an older part of the city and has a grid patterned neighborhood surrounding it. The city block that the school is located on is landlocked by three major streets, including one state highway. Implementing the Safe Routes to School Program (SR2S) became one of the coalition's goals.

The SR2S was introduced to the Principal and the Parent Teacher Organization as a solution. An assessment of how students were traveling to and from school and the traffic patterns was conducted and events encouraging biking and walking to school were organized.

One of the many benefits of this partnership was the increase level of technical assistance from the State program and a greater understanding of health behavior models for change. Based

on what the HEAL coalition was learning from the pilot program, a more comprehensive program including more neighborhoods was developed. The expanded plan was funded by the UW School of Medicine and Public Health. This included monies for training and consulting on Safe Routes to School.

Fortunately, the Pro Walk/Pro Bike National conference was being held in Wisconsin the same year. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation encouraged participation by offering scholarships for community teams of four or more persons from different organizations. The area team included representatives from

### SUMMARY:

**Objective** – To highlight a neighborhood intervention in Wausau and the ancillary benefits that resulted from partnering with local city planners.

**Methods** – The initial focus was a Safe Routes to School program for the neighborhood school. A series of key circumstances resulted in a partnership with city planners that led to a broader bike/pedestrian plan for the metropolitan area.

**Conclusions** – On the path to achieving one goal, opportunities may present themselves to have an even greater impact.

**Implications or Lessons Learned** – Be open to opportunities as they arise and forge new partnerships outside of the "usual" groups. This may ultimately result in a greater success.

Marathon County Public Health, Footprints to Health program, Aspirus Heart and Vascular Institute, and Marathon County Planning and Zoning. The information shared, ideas generated, and relationships developed were tremendous. As a result, a *Bike and Pedestrian Sub-Committee* of the Wausau Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) was formed. This was a turning point in addressing alternative transportation options in the Wausau area.

### Conclusions/Results

The newly formed Bike/Pedestrian Subcommittee includes members from each of the towns, villages, and cities in the MPO service area, law enforcement, engineers, and many other representatives of community organizations, and citizens. This group secured new funding and hired a well known consulting firm to facilitate the development of a 20-year bike/pedestrian plan for the community. The goals in the plan include the implementation of the Safe Routes to School program in urban neighborhood schools.

The Safe Routes to School program was never completely implemented in Franklin School as originally planned. The Wausau School District and the City of Wausau had been quietly working on an action plan to solve a number of issues they were experiencing in the neighborhood. The result was a 1.3 million dollar project including razing three buildings, relocating one business, expanding the fenced green space/play area of the school, changing the bus and parent drop off areas and the entire traffic flow around the school. This made the entire school more viable and safer for everyone. Education on the safest routes to school and encouragement of walking and biking were implemented after the construction and a slight increase in walking was noted in the final neighborhood survey.

### Lessons Learned

Initially the Franklin School PTO was interested in SR2S however they were not mobilized to action. The approach was typical for public health implementation of a program that is good for the health of the community. What became clear was that something much bigger, with larger fiscal and political implications, was happening. After the public announcement of the agreement of the District and the City to literally change the landscape and share the cost, the door was open for education and encouragement of healthy behaviors again. The health message is

important, but not the primary reason or motivator for this major change. The timing of the implementation plan was not aligned with what else was going on and needed to be shifted to meet others needs.

The language spoken by transportation experts and elected officials who make fiscal decisions about implementation is somewhat foreign to public health. In turn, public health professionals have jargon and health data that transportation experts and elected officials find foreign. Learning more about each others goals, priorities, and systems strengthens the ability to partner and create synergy.

### Implications

Connections made with new partners may result in "successful" outcomes that were not originally part of the strategic plan. In this case, partnering with city planners and transportation officials to discuss a Safe Routes to School Program led to a more ongoing relationship that will have larger implications for walking and biking options in the Wausau area. The coalition would not have been able to develop a Bike/Pedestrian plan without key partner buy-in. It will also require a real partnership to implement the plan or it won't be successful. This can happen when you develop a true partnership. It requires; listening to truly understand other perspectives, patience for learning to occur, respecting differences, a willingness to do the work, and trusting in each other.

For More Information, please contact:

Judy Burrows  
Marathon County Health Department  
Manager of Chronic Disease Prevention  
715-261-1905  
[judyburrows@co.marathon.wi.us](mailto:judyburrows@co.marathon.wi.us)

Sue Gantner  
Aspirus Heart & Vascular Institute  
Director of Prevention and Research  
715-847-2490  
[sueg@aspirus.org](mailto:sueg@aspirus.org)



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Wisconsin Nutrition and Physical Activity Program  
<http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/health/physicalactivity/>