



Introduction

In the fall of 2003, a group of passionate health advocates from a variety of backgrounds came together to dream. These individuals wanted to live in a community environment that promoted living a healthy lifestyle every day. It was decided that the group needed a name, vision and mission so that others might understand their passion. The [Health & Wellness Coalition of Wichita](#) met for the first time in January 2004 with the vision that the entire community would live a healthy lifestyle. The Coalition would ***promote physical activity and good nutrition for every generation living in the Greater Wichita area through people, programs, and policies.*** After a year and a half of coordinating people and programs, gaining public support, receiving funds to provide some services and provide a worksite wellness conference, it became obvious it was time to start working at a new level – policy. This work needed to be pushed not only from the grassroots advocates, but it also needed support from the top level down.

The strong organizational structure of the Health & Wellness Coalition has led to many successes in the community. For example, the Leadership Team has dedicated itself to moving the community forward through a variety of policy areas. The “complete streets” concept is now being used in new street and neighborhood designs and plans, the downtown revitalization project has made walkability and bikeability major priorities, the bike ordinances for the City of Wichita have been updated and put out for community member feedback, the city buses now have bike racks on them and are being used in record amounts, connectivity of paths and roadways for bike transportation is a priority of the metropolitan transportation plan and a one percent increase in the 2035 transportation plan has been given to the priority.

The Participants

The Health & Wellness Leadership Team was developed in June 2005 to help establish policy and priorities to support the mission and establish a collective voice for increasing physical activity and improving healthy eating in the community. To fulfill this responsibility, this team needed to be made up of community leaders that understood the lasting effect on the community and the environment. Over the next three years, the membership developed into a strong force with members such as the assistant city manager, city council members, the county commissioner, the county health department director, the chamber of commerce, the director of the Wichita YMCA association, two program directors from local foundations, and a representative from one of the largest businesses in the community:

- Suzie Ahlstrand – Wichita Chamber
- Claudia Blackburn – Sedgwick County Health Department Director
- Kiersten Camp – Nurse, Cessna (large aircraft company)

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- Cathy Holdeman – Assistant City Manager, City of Wichita
- Mim McKenzie – Wichita YMCA
- Carol Nazar – Program Officer, Wichita Community Foundation
- Tim Norton – Sedgwick County Commissioner
- Dennis Schoenebeck – General Executive, Wichita YMCA
- Becky Tuttle – Sedgwick County Health Department
- Jeff Usher – Program Officer, Kansas Health Foundation
- Lavonta Williams – Councilwoman, City of Wichita

Chronology

In the fall of 2008, the Leadership Team became aware of research on city engineers in Kansas City and their lack of education on the terminology that supports a healthy environment. In that study, the term “complete streets” was third from the bottom on a recognition scale. To ensure that city staff responsible for the built environment did not respond in a similar way, the Leadership Team decided to host a Complete Street workshop for all city and county engineers, City of Wichita Public Works administrators, City Council members and the County Commissioners. Before they could advocate for any change or improvements, everyone involved needed to be educated equally.

- October 2008 – Kansas City research shared
- February 2009 – Complete Streets Workshop provided
- July 2009 – City of Wichita Public Works Director proposes two “complete streets” pilot projects to the City Council and they are approved
- December 2009 – City of Wichita includes “complete streets” concepts in new design plans for a central business district street
- May 2010 – Wichita Area Metropolitan Planning Organization increases budget allocation by 1% for pathways in the 2035 plan
- June 2010 – Downtown revitalization draft plans include a portion of the design dedicated to making downtown more walkable and bikeable.

Process

Educating leaders in the community on local, state and national resources and terminology so they were prepared for the healthy community advocates was the strategy used to move this work forward. Building relationships with those that work in the community design business and offering support or resources where needed made the difference in changing plans for the community.

Effective Practices

The Leadership Team discussed as a team but took on individual responsibilities and continually shared the same message to move this work forward. Educating those that need it and supporting those that want to build a healthy environment became the role of the Health & Wellness Coalition. Once community leaders started making small changes, the Health & Wellness Coalition’s list-serve was informed so they could thank and support the City staff and leaders.

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Challenges Ahead

During the next year, there will be elections for new city and county leadership. Keeping individuals in those seats that support building a healthy community will be very important. The implementation of the Downtown Revitalization Plans will begin, and it will be necessary to make sure that the transportation plan is followed so the community can see walking and biking as a form of transportation and not as simply recreational.

Lessons Learned

When an individual uses walking and/or biking as a mode of transportation, they not only save money, they build a healthier body that allows them to live a higher quality of life. This is not possible unless there is access to streets and pathways which are safe for this type of transportation. Access to food markets, schools, or businesses by walking or biking have to occur to be able to encourage this type of healthy lifestyle. Pathways or trails are recreationally enjoyable, but until there is a built environment that supports walking and biking as modes of transportation for every-day use, there will be no impact on developing healthy lifestyles.

Adding health as a goal to the work of city planners, engineers and public works staff is not an easy task. It is important that these individuals understand that safety will still be a priority and that the quality of work will not suffer. Teaching the health promoters in the community about the planning, developing and implementation of a built environment is extremely important as well. All groups involved have to work together and understand the different processes that occur when dealing with a community structure. If goals are not mutually respected, this work can become divisive and will stall quickly.

Contact Information

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