

Stepping Forward

Evaluation of Active Living by Design | Luzerne County, Pennsylvania | 2003-2008

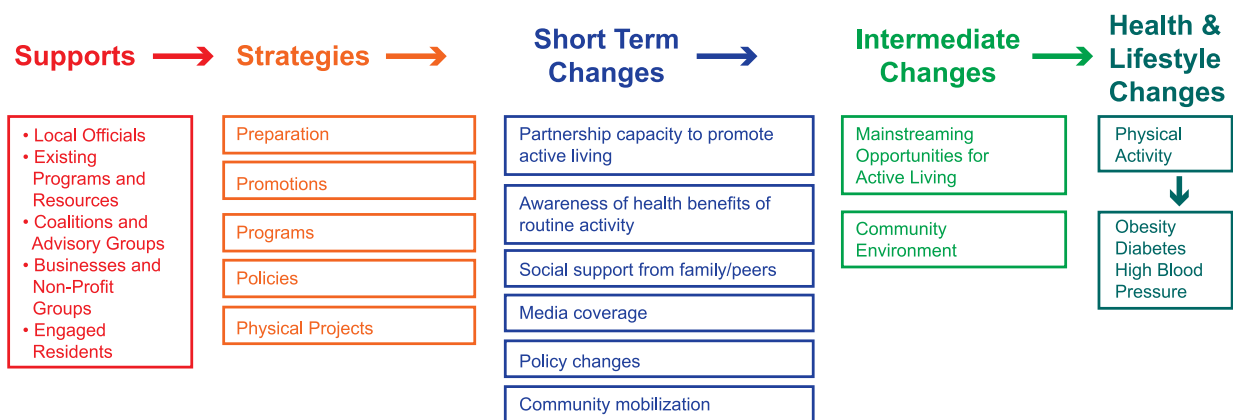
On a trail just outside of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, a group of children raced to find the answer to the next question in their Keystone Active Zone Passport: What is the name of the fourth exercise station on the trail? That same day, teens from the local YMCA hiked at a state park, and older adults participated in a “Walk with Ease” walking group designed for individuals with limited mobility. All of these efforts were part of a local movement to create a network of urban, suburban, and rural paths that would enable residents to practice active living in their daily lives, specifically through active transportation and active recreation.

“[The Active Living by Design grant] has created a community of people that’s speaking the same language and singing from the same hymnal.” -Partner

“Active living” is a way of life that integrates physical activity into daily routines in order to accumulate at least 30 minutes of activity each day. In November 2003, Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership received a five-year, \$200,000 grant as part of the Active Living by Design national program (www.activelivingbydesign.org) funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. By advocating for changes in community design, specifically land use, transportation, parks, trails, and greenways, the Active Living by Design initiative intended to make it easier for people to be active in their daily routines.¹

The Active Living by Design Community Action Model provided five active living strategies to influence community change: Preparation, Promotions, Programs, Policies, and Physical Projects. The 5Ps represent a comprehensive approach to increasing physical activity through short-term, intermediate, and long-term community changes. This inclusive model allowed the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership to develop support and infrastructure for active recreation and transportation across urban, suburban, and rural communities.

Active Living by Design Community Action Model



In 1998, the Pennsylvania Environmental Council hosted a series of workshops on greenways and trails with the National Park Service. During one of these workshops, participants came up with an idea to link the trails/greenways community with the health care community to promote physical activity. The Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership, an alliance of health, recreation, planning, and community-service organizations was founded in 1999 to link the area’s trail projects with resources and support of health-related organizations and agencies to address rising levels of chronic disease.

¹ The Active Living by Design (ALbD) initiative was established by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) in 2001, and its National Program Office (NPO) is part of the University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Twenty-five interdisciplinary community partnerships were selected across the country to demonstrate how changing community design can impact physical activity. Transtria was funded by RWJF to work with the NPO to conduct ALbD evaluation and dissemination activities. This case report draws from Transtria’s evaluation efforts.

In 2002, the partnership viewed the Active Living by Design (ALbD) grant as an opportunity to expand its mission to include active transportation and provide a formal, central organization for the numerous trail-building efforts underway in the region.

The Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership's vision was translated into action through three strategic priorities. First, the partnership aimed to connect communities and trails by bringing together trail organizations to increase capacity for developing, maintaining, and promoting trails. Second, the partnership strove to capitalize on the strengths of the current built environment and promote changes that included active living principles to redefine trails. Lastly, the partnership promoted active living through the use of the trail network.

“I think that there have been a number of different positive outcomes from the partnership’s work. One which I think is very important in this community, in particular, is an increased emphasis on getting the local population out and walking and engaging in active exercise. They’ve done some good work in putting together programs to try and to encourage people to go outside... They’ve also done a lot of work in trying to knit together the trail systems that have been created.” -Partner

Luzerne County, Pennsylvania

Wyoming Valley is a 30-mile corridor in Luzerne County that lies along the Susquehanna River in Northeast Pennsylvania. The region includes urban, suburban, and rural areas with municipality sizes ranging from 0.37 square miles to 29 square miles and population densities ranging from 84 people per square mile to about 6500 per square mile. The majority of residents (72.8%) live in urban areas. With about 42,000 residents, the City of Wilkes-Barre is the largest of 36 municipalities in the county. Nearly 20% of Wyoming Valley residents are over the age of 65, giving it one of the largest older-adult populations in the United States.



While there is economic diversity throughout the region, a large portion of the population can be described as socio-economically disadvantaged. Nearly one third of the region's population has an annual household income of \$25,000 or less, and less than 20% of residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Previously a coal mining region, Wyoming Valley faced a period of economic instability that recently showed signs of recovery as local industries diversified. Still, the region's unemployment rate is higher than the state average.

Wyoming Valley residents face a number of health issues, including high rates of obesity, alcohol use, and smoking. Rates of preventable disease morbidity and mortality (e.g., heart disease, diabetes, colon cancer) are higher than the state averages. Health status is further complicated by low rates of physical activity among the residents: 36% do not exercise.

In terms of recreation, the region's natural environment is an asset, although it is underutilized. However, the built environment and availability of healthy lifestyle amenities can be improved. Recreational facilities, including community centers (e.g., Catholic Youth Center, YMCA, Jewish Community Center), tend to be concentrated in the urban downtown areas. While many older communities are pedestrian-friendly, suburbs and rural areas have automobile centered designs. The physical geography of the region influenced land development, resulting in a transportation network that is not conducive to pedestrian or bike traffic. Hilly terrain, narrow streets, and large highways inhibit alternative, more active modes of transportation.

“But I think also it’s geography. I mean we are in a valley, there are mountains on the sides of us. It’s not Nebraska where if I wanted to ride 40 miles in a straight line then I probably could.” -Partner

Wilkes-Barre has a public transit system, but it is limited to the urban center and does not provide a feasible alternative mode of transport for most Wyoming Valley residents. Thus, the majority of residents depend upon their cars. In addition, a physical disconnect between residents, potential jobs, and shopping areas discouraged active transportation.

“Meracle is our large industrial developer. They always build their corporate parks and industrial centers on the east side of the river, but all the housing developers always build their housing mostly in Back Mountain, on the west side of the river, or up mountain top. So there’s this true disconnect between the people who are largely developing the corporate centers away from the places where people are developing the housing. And this isn’t totally true, I mean there’s an industrial center up the mountain top and there’s a couple of, of business centers in Back mountain, but not many.” -Partner

Preparation

Partnership

Though the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership was founded prior to the ALbD grant, the funding and support was critical to the partnership’s success. Through the collaborative efforts of local health systems, trail organizations, government agencies, and not-for-profit environmental and development groups, the partnership strove to improve health and quality of life by promoting and increasing opportunities for physical activity and active transportation.

Early in the ALbD grant period, members of the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership participated in a stakeholder analysis to identify disciplines and organizations that were missing from the original partnership. Based on this analysis, new partners were recruited, often by making use of existing working relationships. Under the ALbD grant, the partnership expanded its pool of expertise and resources and enhanced its ability to promote and increase physical activity in the community.

After engaging new members, the partnership took several steps to create a formal structure and process. This kept members engaged and informed ensuring all efforts were in line with the partnership’s mission. The partnership then formulated its action plan, Stepping Forward, defining its vision and strategies for achieving its mission dedicated to increasing active living and developing trails. Members gathered to establish a regular meeting schedule, create by-laws, form technical committees, and elect a board.

After defining its vision, the partnership identified and facilitated numerous activities to support each strategy. Following the 5P model, the partnership executed its vision through policy changes, physical projects, promotions, and programs. Each implementation mode supported the Partnership’s main goal of promoting and increasing active living.

Members shared responsibility for facilitating meetings, recording and distributing meeting notices and notes, identifying funding opportunities, networking with other organizations, and recruiting new members and resources. Trail organizations were responsible for trail development and reported on their progress at partnership meetings.

The partnership met monthly for the first three years of the grant. While all members attended initial meetings, the partnership eventually settled into a routine in which a core group of five to seven partners attended most meetings. For targeted meetings most partners were involved or were contacted individually. As efforts became institutionalized, the partnership met less frequently.

Partners, staff, and community members identified several beneficial characteristics of the partnership:

- The partnership was the first and only coalition of its kind in Luzerne County. Its pioneering mission focused exclusively on improving opportunities for physical activity.
- The partners came from diverse organizations and represented a range of perspectives and skills, which resulted in a well-rounded foundation.
- Despite the physical distance inherent to working across a large region, the partners were able to maintain communications, in part due to the efforts of the Program Manager.
- The participation in the partnership led to new relationships and opportunities for collaboration outside of the ALbD grant. Participation in the partnership helped members realize how their work connected to others and how they could work together to improve the community.
- Partners were able to achieve shared goals while promoting their individual interests.
- The ALbD grant led partnership and community members to think about health in terms of policies and the built environment.
- The partnership fulfilled the need for centralized organization to gather information and promote local parks, trails, and outdoor activities.

“I think that just being here and doing this kind of work, in some sense we’re almost the first on the ground in Pennsylvania to do it. Then as we’ve been established, we’ve made connections and been able to say OK we know that you guys want to do something about outdoor play, we want to do something about outdoor play, so let’s partner and do it.” -Staff

“That was a real challenge, what we saw as bringing together pieces and thinking about how they interconnect. I think Active Living by Design was probably the avenue being really able to do that, to help people to think about how they might connect. I don’t think that they were at that point before.” -Staff

“I think one of the things that collaboration does is its helps to increase that conversation about health in general and that health is a lot more than doctors and your clinic and access to care. Health has much more to so with public policy and, if you look at the last hundred years, the things that have really advanced people’s health aren’t doctors, but it’s public policy... The more that we can increase that type of conversation about what is health and why it’s important and having a trail is important to your health [the better].” -Partner

Partners, staff, and community members also noted many challenges to creating and maintaining the partnership:

- Initially, narrowing the focus and defining vision was a lengthy process that contributed to a slow start for the ALbD activities.
- Many partners’ jobs restricted their available time to dedicate to the partnership.
- Meetings were often held separately for health and trail organizations, with the Project Manager serving as an intermediary between the two.
- It was difficult to sustain support from certain organizations, specifically from health and non-profit groups.
- Because the partnership’s goals were additional to their own organizational goals, some partners did not feel they could devote significant time to the partnership.
- It was challenging to create meeting agendas that kept partners engaged.
- Some partners had misconceptions about other partners’ roles and responsibilities.
- The partnership name, Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership, did not reflect the more diverse goals of the ALbD grant, which included Safe Routes to School and urban sidewalk networks.

“The problem is the Wellness Trails Partnership has a very defined title. It’s about wellness; it’s about trails. So if an organization calling itself the Wellness Trails Partnership shows up at a local municipality [and says] we’ve done an assessment of your streets, and you have to fix them... Meanwhile [the municipality has] no funding to change the quality of its streets. It’s hard to advocate for fixing streets in a municipality when they do not have money for streets.” -Staff

“A weakness of our community, not necessarily the partnership, is that it’s very hard to get people together and kind of combine forces, and that’s in both the health world and in the trails and environmental world.” -Staff

The table below lists the partners involved in the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails partnership.

Members of the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership	
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All Ways Healthy • Arthritis Foundation • Blue Cross of Northeast Pennsylvania • City of Wilkes-Barre Health Department • Gateway Health Plan • Geisinger Heart Center • Healthy Northeast Pennsylvania Initiative • Luzerne County Safe Kids Coalition • Maternal and Family Health Services* • Mercy Health Partners • Penn State Hershey Medical Center - Center for Activity and Nutrition • Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity (Luzerne County) • Pennsylvania Department of Health • Steps to a Healthier Pennsylvania - Luzerne County • Wyoming Valley Health Care System
Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint Urban Studies Center • King’s College • Luzerne County-Penn State Cooperative Extension • Pennsylvania State University <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Architecture Department • Wilkes University
Parks, Trails & Recreation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anthracite Scenic Trail Council • Delaware & Lehigh Canal National Heritage Corridor • Francis Slocum State Park • Greater Hazelton Rail-to-Trails • Luzerne County Department of Parks and Recreation • Luzerne County National Recreation Trail • National Park Service Rivers, Trails Conservation Assistance Program • Nescopeck State Park • Northeast Pennsylvania Mountain Biking Association • Penn State University Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies • Pittson YMCA • Rails-to-Trails Conservancy • Riverfront Parks Committee • Susquehanna Trailers Club • Susquehanna Warrior Trail Council • Westside Trail Committee • Wilkes-Barre Family YMCA

Members of the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership (continued)	
Urban Design, Planning & Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Luzerne County <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engineer's Office - Planning Commission
Other Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area Agency on Aging • Luzerne County Flood Protection District • Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earth Conservancy • Luzerne County Safe Kids Coalition • Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity (Luzerne County) • Pennsylvania Environmental Council
Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Around Town Bicycles • Borton Lawson Engineers • Country Ski & Sport Shop • Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber Business and Industry • Local architectural & engineering groups • Personna Photography • Sickler's Bike Shop
Community & Faith-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girl Scouts of Northeast Pennsylvania • King's College, Shoal Center for Community Development
Community Leaders, Policy and Decision Makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Council

*Organization that served as lead agency during the ALbD grant period

Leadership and Champions

Maternal and Family Health Services, an established preventive health services provider, served as lead agency for the ALbD grant. The organization had served the area for several decades, providing, among other services, the region's largest Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) services. The core mission of this non-profit preventive health services organization included the promotion of healthy lifestyles. The CEO's personal affinity for the outdoors cemented Maternal and Family Health Services' involvement in the ALbD grant.

As lead agency, Maternal and Family Health Services provided various services and resources to the ALbD partnership, such as fiduciary management, workspace, and expertise (e.g., information technology, marketing). The lead agency was centrally located in the heart of the Wyoming Valley's downtown core, near a hub of the area's developing trail network.

The ALbD grant was led by the Project Director, a role filled by two different individuals over the course of the grant period. The first Project Director was a Community Development Associate with Gateway Health Plan, which was a medical-assistance, managed-care plan for lower-income residents. Her background in community development was a tremendous asset to the partnership. She held the position for almost two years before she was reassigned to a different role within her organization and was unable to continue working with the partnership. The second Project Director, an employee of the lead agency, had a background in communications, community development, and grant writing.

Maintaining an organized and effective project would not have been possible without the numerous skills and contributions of a part-time Project Manager. She was hired after the ALbD grant was awarded and became a key player for all five years of the grant. As the only paid employee of the partnership, the Project Manager was a valuable investment. She was a trained urban planner and geographic information systems (GIS) professional. Partners noted and appreciated her non-judgmental, diplomatic personality.

“Having a Program Manager who is willing to drive the program was the best thing for this program’s success. The start-up of the partnership was a slow process, and bringing all the players to the table was difficult, but [our Program Manager] worked tirelessly with not a ton of support. I think the program got its money’s worth with a good manager.” -Partner

“So you have that lull time... the momentum dies down because now you don’t have anything more happening. What has helped us, and I’ve always said this to [our project manager], that if it wasn’t for her, and all the activities that she’s orchestrated on our trail... That really helped us keep that momentum going, and if it hadn’t been for that, people would’ve just peeled out...” -Partner

The Project Manager noted a number of important considerations. She was new to the community and believed that local residents might have a better understanding of the community and stronger connections to community decision makers. She also noted that she had less experience with communication, which was a major part of the partnership’s efforts.

“We did [the Active Living by Design grant] at a time when I was new to the community and I didn’t know the players and stuff like that and also I wasn’t aware really of what we could do and what we really couldn’t do and the speed at which the trails would be built and all of that other stuff.” -Staff

The partnership also benefited from the leadership of Steps to a Healthier PA-Luzerne County (Steps), which provided paid staff support and leadership for a number of the partnership’s efforts, especially promotions. Steps worked to create organizational capacity for wellness in schools and worksites provided the partnership with contacts within these organizations and increased awareness of active living.

Funding and Resources

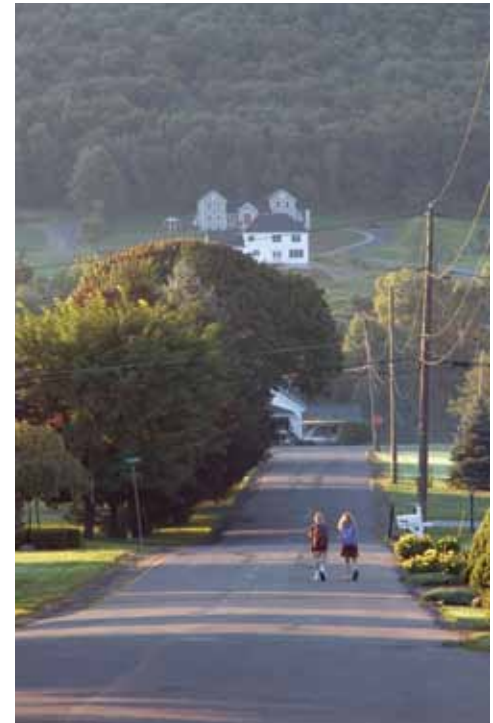
ALbD funding was used primarily to hire a part-time Project Manager and to pay for research, programs, and promotions. In addition to the ALbD grant received from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the partnership reached out to a number of local, state, and national organizations to increase the financial and in-kind contributions available to support active living efforts:

- Anthracite Scenic Trails Association Back Mountain Trail
- Berwick Health and Wellness Fund
- Blue Ribbon Foundation of Blue Cross of Northeastern Pennsylvania
- City of Wilkes-Barre Department of Health
- Edith Reynolds Trust
- Entercom radio stations
- Gateway Health Plan
- Geisinger Community Foundation
- Greater Hazleton Rails to Trails
- Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry
- Healthy Northeast Pennsylvania Initiative
- Joint Urban Studies Center
- Local architects
- Luzerne County Commissioners
- Luzerne County Department of Parks and Recreation
- Luzerne County Office of Community Development
- Luzerne County Safekids Coalition
- Maternal and Family Health Services
- National Park Service Rivers and Trails Program
- Penn State Hazleton
- Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity
- Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
- Pennsylvania Department of Health
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation
- Pennsylvania Environmental Council
- Pennsylvania Recreation and Parks Department
- Personna Photography
- Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
- Sordoni Foundation
- Steps to a Healthier PA Luzerne County
- WBRE television
- WYLN television

Community Supports and Challenges

The partnership faced a unique challenge in considering how to enhance the walkability of urban, suburban, and rural communities. Urban and rural residents perceive walkability in very different ways. Individuals living in a downtown area might think an area is active living-friendly if they can walk to work and run errands, whereas individuals in rural areas might think of active living in terms of access to trails. The partnership believed the trail network would provide a vehicle for physically linking these communities and integrating their perceptions of active living and walkability.

Despite the appeal of the natural environment in the region, partners noted that many residents did not utilize this resource for a variety of reasons. Some residents misconceived that trail use required strenuous hiking. Others did not realize that walking on the trails was a source of exercise and beneficial to their health. Likewise, many residents were unaware of the overall benefits of active transportation and effect the built environment had on health.



“This Valley, and the surrounding area, has a tremendous amount of outdoor assets, and unfortunately a lot of people don’t get the connection to quality of life, recreation, and economic development and job creation.” -Partner

“That was one thing that I think people had a hard time wrapping their arms around was the connection. Now people that we involved with it certainly got it right away but people in the community had a hard time wrapping their arms around the built environment being associated with physical activity.” -Staff

While the partnership strove to engender support rather than opposition from the community, some residents remained opposed to the ALbD efforts, others hesitated to show their support. For example, one partner noted there was a difficulty in getting supportive community members to attend community meetings in order to counterbalance those who actively opposed the trail-building efforts.

“That’s one of the problems that we have. People that are for the trail, you can’t get them to a meeting because they’re saying, yeah, ok we like it. But people that are against it, they’re the ones that come, the nay-sayers. And boy oh boy do they raise a ruckus...” -Partner

Despite the challenges, community support was central to the success of the partnerships’ efforts and to the planning processes of the trail organization partners. Much of the emerging local support for trails and recreational programs was attributed to economic and business factors rather than health motivators.

“I think it’s been amazing to see the local people get it for a lot of the reasons we’re familiar with it from economic to health to recreation. Everybody seems to have their different needs or there’s a lot of overlap and we’ve really had some great local champions.... It’s just been amazing.” -Partner

While the partnership had high levels of organizational support from its partners, the partnership itself was not well known across its large project area. As its geographic area increased, the partnership was able to attract and accommodate additional organizations with larger target populations and more resources.

“Since the partnership started, trails have been developing so more throughout the county. I think a lot of the partner organizations and healthcare organizations cover a broader area than just the Wyoming Valley, and [the partnership has] evolved over time... People get sore, they’re like, why aren’t you including me and we’re like OK, sure, no problem, we’ll include you.” -Staff

At the same time, the partnership recognized a general trend in decreased participation and resources from large, not-for-profit organizations. Many of the larger health organizations were forced to cutback or eliminate their community development/community health functions, thus affecting their ability to support efforts, such as the partnership. In addition, many large social service or health advocacy not-for-profits restructured closing regional offices to centralize functions in the state capital or other major cities.

A number of partners were very supportive of active living, specifically because implementation of the active living principles was sensible from a business perspective. For example, the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry created information pieces and entered public discussion to forward its goal, recreating downtown Wilkes-Barre as “the walkable, livable community in Northeast Pennsylvania.” The president drafted an op-ed piece that mentioned the Chamber’s commitment to “Quality of Place,” the protection of the natural environment, healthy valley communities, and creating well-planned, sustainable growth.

“I do think that the best way to reach community leaders who are fixated on bottom line results and on financial outcomes is to focus the way that one talks about these issues in terms of those financial outcomes.” -Partner

The fruits of the local active living movement flourished a number of independent efforts. The Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry created a mixed-use development that included a cinema, ground-level retail, and potential loft residential space. The development was credited with increasing downtown activity. The Downtown Wilkes-Barre Business Improvement District, formed during the ALbD grant period, funded cleanliness and security efforts to create a more walkable downtown. The group also repositioned or replaced sidewalk pavers, removed graffiti, and power-washed sidewalks.

Political support had the potential to be an important contributor to the partnership’s success, especially trail development efforts. Unfortunately but many leaders did not pay much attention to trail-building efforts unless the community called them to action or they had a personal interest in the partnership’s mission. In addition, the expansive project area and numerous municipalities complicated involvement in the political process.

“I’ve worked for local government for the last 10 years. Depending upon who’s in the office and when and who supports your plans is basically what drives stuff. If you get some folks that see it and buy into it, you’re lucky. If you don’t, it’s an uphill battle. It just takes a lot longer. And we’re fortunate that we’ve got some that get it, some that don’t at, at all levels.” -Partner

“Through the planning process, I’ve reached out to local municipalities and volunteers, and we’ve had a lot of local champions step up and just think that these trails are great.” -Partner

Community Assessment

The partnership engaged in a number of assessment and evaluation activities to determine the community’s needs and build awareness and support for active living efforts. The various assessments provided background about the community and built environment, outlining conditions that supported and hindered physical activity in the Valley. Using information gathered from these assessments, the partnership was then able to build on the community’s strengths and address its weaknesses when designing and implementing strategies to promote and increase active living.

Partnership staff and members conducted a number of strategic planning assessments. In a focus group, local professionals discussed common campaigns for physical activity. Partnership staff analyzed the feedback in order to develop a list of physical activity promotion strategies to avoid. Partnership staff also conducted surveys to determine residents’ perceived barriers (e.g., lack of time, lack of access) and facilitators of trail use. (e.g., being in nature, stress relief, adventure)

“We had a focus group and that was very useful because it told us that people are not interested in going outdoors and being active for their health. And it took us a little while to actually apply it because we were still very health-focused at that time.” -Staff

Partnership staff and members also conducted a number of assessments of the physical environment, including feasibility studies as part of the planning process for trails. For example, the Anthracite Scenic Trails Association's Ridge to River Connector Feasibility Study assessed options for aligning a route to connect the Black Diamond Trail with Wilkes-Barre's downtown and the Susquehanna River Trail that included an examination of crossing points and major bicycle/pedestrian barriers. Two trail studies (i.e., the Greater Kingston Area Greenways/Trails Study, the City of Wilkes-Barre Greenways/Trails Study) focused on making connections between multi-use trails in urban areas. Luzerne County Department of Parks and Recreation spearheaded the Recreation Entity Feasibility Study to identify funding needed to complete and maintain a set of parks and trails throughout the county.

The Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry, Luzerne County, and the Penn State Department of Architecture participated in a visioning session to link urban and small-town communities in six areas of the downtown Wyoming Valley Core (Wilkes-Barre, Edwinstown, and Kingston). Architecture students also studied core downtown areas to make recommendations to improve walkability at six key intersections.

The partnership worked with Steps and Penn State University Department of Parks, Recreation, and Leisure Studies to create an inventory of local physical activity opportunities to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement. The study found that school-aged youth lacked opportunities for outdoor recreation, like hiking, biking, and canoeing. The partnership also worked with the Joint Urban Studies Center and Steps to draft a report assessing local programs addressing physical activity, nutrition, and tobacco control.

“We did a little bit of work on what’s here and what’s missing. And I think that what we discovered is there really isn’t that much opportunities for youth to hike and bike, teenagers, and we’ve tried to address that...” -Staff

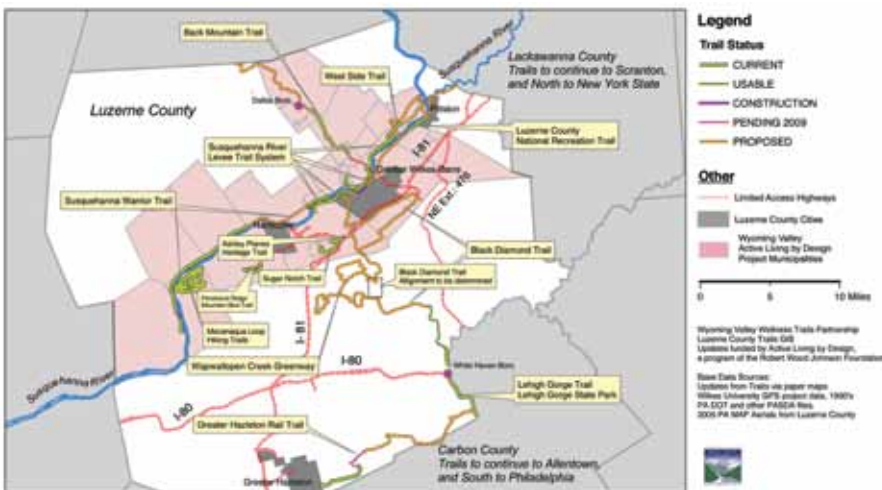
The partnership also used a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Special Opportunities grant to build the capacity of trail organizations to use trail counter technology to monitor trail use. A trail counter placed on the Greater Hazleton Rail Trail in mid-September 2007 counted 30,000 visits in a 19-month period, with an increasing trend.

Policies and Physical Projects

The main focus of the partnership's ALbD work plan was to facilitate the development of a trail network by increasing trail connections, bringing trails into residential areas, revitalizing existing walkable communities (urban trails), and building planned trails. Prior to the ALbD grant, much of the proposed trail network was envisioned and included in the Luzerne/Lackawanna County Open Space and Recreation Plan. However, only eight of the ninety-three planned miles were completed. A number of trails were in various stages of planning and construction at the beginning of the ALbD grant. The role of the partnership was to facilitate communication and cooperation between the trail organization partners leading the construction efforts. The partnership also focused on influencing large-scale development goals in the Wyoming Valley to be more pedestrian friendly and enhance the quality of life. Policy influences and physical projects; related partner, staff, and community implementation activities; and associated challenges are described as follows.

► **Trails and Parks**

- Over the course of the ALbD project, trail organizations constructed 22 miles of multi-use trails connecting at least 12 communities, with many more miles in development.
- The following trails in the Wyoming Valley region were renovated, expanded, or constructed during the ALbD grant period:
 - Back Mountain Trail (2.4 miles)
 - Luzerne County National Recreational Trail (1.8 miles)
 - Sugar Notch Trail (3 miles)
 - Susquehanna Warrior Trail (10 miles)
 - Susquehanna River Levee Trail/River Common Park (over 6 miles)
 - West Side Trail (1.5 miles)
- The partnership’s trail work included a number of small physical projects. Benches were installed. Trail counters were installed to track trail use. Emergency call boxes were placed on trails to increase safety. Signage and trail markers were enhanced. A recycled bridge was installed for pedestrian- and cyclist-use on Black Diamond Trail between White Haven and Wilkes-Barre.
- The partnership worked to link long-distance rural trails with those in the more dense communities, in an effort to connect residents with towns and provide alternative transportation options.
- Urban, downtown walking loops were planned to increase community access to attractive, well-marked pathways so people working, living, and attending school in downtown areas could incorporate walking in daily routine. Residents were encouraged to think of these sidewalks and neighborhood paths as urban trails. Unfortunately, the loops were never funded.
- As part of the Susquehanna River Levee Raising project, Riverfront Park was constructed in downtown Wilkes-Barre. The park, which includes a segment of the Susquehanna River Levee Trail was designated as the hub of the emerging network of trails. The park also provided a bandshell, fishing pier, and a fountain designed to encourage active play.
- Over 20 miles of mountain biking trails were created at Moon Lake County Park.



Luzerne County Trails Fall 2008 : Existing, Proposed, and Under Construction

“There are all these little [trail] pieces that are in the process of being constructed, so we’ve actually really seen some really significant trail construction and the nice thing is that it will continue, too.” -Staff

“[The partnership has] also done a lot of work in trying to knit together the trail systems that have been created, particularly in the urban core of the Wilkes-Barre area.” -Partner

► ***Efforts to influence and inform decision-makers***

- Partnership staff advocated for active living principles and development, which led to many benefits such as increased quality of life, and community development, and the presence of public health at a number of public meetings and planning sessions for a range of local efforts, including the Joint Urban Studies Indicators Report, the Pennsylvania Injury Symposia, and the Bi-County Comprehensive Land Use, Transportation, and Hazard Mitigation plan.
- Partners faxed letters to local congressional representatives describing the ALbD efforts and partnership and requesting meetings. Through these efforts, partnership staff were able to meet with representatives of the Wyoming Valley area to discuss the active living movement and the ALbD project. The representatives were invited to various ALbD events.
- Student-drawn images of active downtown Wilkes-Barre were displayed as part of Joint Urban Studies' Center Small Cities Conference. The images were reviewed by decision-makers in Luzerne County, including county commissioners, and the Mayor of Wilkes-Barre.
- Steps and the partnership met with the interim county commissioner to provide information and get support for a number of active living initiatives.
- The partnership served on the steering committee and provided funding to support two Trail and Greenway Master Plans in urban communities of the Wyoming Valley.
- Partnership staff presented the State of Trails document to Luzerne County Commissioners. The presentation highlighted that the County's \$300,000 community development funding had leveraged \$9 million in additional funding.

► ***School-based Policies and Physical Projects***

- Partnership staff, Steps, educated trail organizations, school districts, and community members collaborated on school wellness policies and Safe Routes to School projects.
- The partnership served as a technical advisor for Safe Routes efforts on issues such as transportation design and options for built environment change.
- The Heights-Terrace School in the Wilkes-Barre Area School District received a Safe Routes to school grant to assess the neighborhood and implement a 5E plan (i.e., Evaluation, Engineering, Education, Encouragement, Enforcement).
- Trail organizations were especially interested because of the possibility of using Safe Routes funding to build segments of in-town trails. For example, the West Side Trail Commission received \$1.2 million Safe Routes to advance its trail.
- The partnership supported Dallas, Jackson-Lehman, and Sherman Elementary schools in their efforts to create campus walking trails. As a result, a one-mile path connected two elementary schools and one campus created a quarter-mile track.
- With leadership from Steps, 11 school districts formed wellness councils.
- In the final year of the grant, partnership members spoke against elimination of one of two recess sessions for third through fifth grades at elementary schools in one of the larger school districts in the Wyoming Valley. The change was made, despite parent and community objections, because of concerns related to test scores.

► **Other Policies and Physical Projects**

- Steps provided partners involved in workforce wellness with information about active living and employee benefits policies and challenged them to create worksite wellness committees and policies to reach 30,000 employees.
- Luzerne County provided over \$100,000 in grant funding to the Wilkes-Barre Family YMCA for new equipment, including supplies for Dance Dance Revolution and a sports wall.
- One partner, Luzerne County Flood Protection District, worked with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation to design and construct the Rutter Avenue bike path, which included removal and replacement of medians, striping the pedestrian crosswalks, and construction of a sidewalk and a bike lane on a highway ramp/bridge. The bike path linked the Kingston Levee Trail with a path in a neighboring town.



Staff, partners, and community members identified a number of facilitators for implementing policy and physical project efforts:

- Trail organizations provided strong, committed leadership for creating change in the physical environment.
- Many of the trails projects were being conducted concurrently, which ensured that the trail network consistently and successfully progressed.
- The partnership learned to address concerns about the placement of planned trails by involving the community in early planning activities.
- The partners learned the importance of gaining community support through educational and promotional efforts prior to beginning trail-building efforts.
- There was a growing demand from existing and new residents for opportunities and amenities, such as trails and other wellness facilities.

“The biggest strength in the community partnership is that we have all of these organizations that are strongly committed to physical change in the environment, which is the trail organizations. And there’s not just one, there are many of them, and they’re all working very hard to establish trails.” -Staff

“What we tried to do is reach out early on in the planning process, and not put lines on a map that show anything for a very long time, so that you’re engaging the community, finding out where they want that line to be. Because once you put a map up there, even though it means nothing that generates resistance and concerns. I think it’s important to really have the community respond and tell you what they want and then plan accordingly.” -Staff

“If people had put all their eggs into one basket and said, ‘Oh, we’re just going to do these two trails,’ and they hit a roadblock, we wouldn’t have had anything going. But since we have had all of these groups, each of them concentrating on different areas, building their own advocacy... that has really been kind of a grassroots trail-building process.” -Staff

Staff, partners, and community members identified a number of challenges in implementing policy and physical project efforts:

- Trail organizations faced difficulty assembling rights-of-way to establish trail alignments in many cases because they were reliant on donations of easements from private landowners.
- Individual landowners were reluctant to relinquish land because of privacy and safety, while corporate landowners were reluctant to release any interest in property for free.
- Some community members opposed trail development because they viewed trail projects as frivolous and believed the money should be spent on more urgent needs.
- One major challenge encountered by the partnership was the slow pace of trail construction. For most trails, time from initial planning to construction was 10-15 years.
- In the Wyoming Valley, most trails were developed by volunteer organizations that worked with two different state agencies to secure funding and were in competition with other parks and trail projects across the state.
- Challenges with trail construction included maintaining momentum and support, funding operations and maintenance, and connecting to other trails.
- The largest policy challenge for the partnership was in understanding the policy making process and getting the attention of decision makers in municipal governments and schools.
- Dealing with multiple school districts (7) and numerous municipalities (36) meant trying to reach across many school administrations and municipal governments.

“The idea that [trails are] a luxury, that we are a community that is struggling, we can’t afford it. There’s no understanding of how [trails have] a direct impact on their financial well being and on their community’s well being too.” -Partner

“You have that lull time on your trail development where you got the momentum going, you’ve got everybody excited about a trail, you even got the public going, and it’s just wonderful. But then the momentum dies down because now you don’t have anything more happening.” -Partner

“There are numerous trails throughout the area. Getting urban trails on the map and linked to the suburban/rural trails will be a future challenge for the partnership.” -Partner

Programs and Promotions

The partnership viewed programmatic and promotional strategies as key to their efforts for increasing physical activity in the community. The programs and promotions were designed to complement physical project and policy work underway. In the end, the partnership’s efforts were largely successful at connecting communities to trails, re-defining perceptions of trails, and promoting active living through trails. Specifically, the programs provided opportunities to translate the active living message into real, concrete activities. Programs and promotions; related partner, staff and community implementation activities; and associated challenges are described as follows.

► **Keystone Active Zone Passport Program**

- One of the largest programs offered by the partnership, the Keystone Active Zone Passport Program promoted awareness and increased use of Luzerne County parks and trails in an effort for local residents to be more physically active and explore the outdoors.
- The Passport was developed from a statewide framework designed by the Center for Activity and Nutrition at Penn State Hershey Medical Center, a state obesity prevention partner.
- The Passport booklet included a schematic map, resource websites, and phone numbers for passport stops.
- Participants took part in an active scavenger hunt to answer questions based on features found in local parks and trails. Participants were encouraged to visit as many of the locations as possible to answer questions and receive stamps to fill their passports. Prizes included clip-on flashing lights, fold-up Frisbees, whistles, and compasses.
- Passports were distributed at local events the first two years of the program. In the third and subsequent years, the partnership made the Passport available online (www.kazpassport.org), allowing participants to download forms and later submit answers to receive stamps by email. The availability of the online Passport significantly boosted participation in the program and allowed staff to better track participants' activities.
- The program served 48 people in its first year and over 800 at the end of the ALbD grant.
- Evaluations demonstrated that the program was effective in getting people out to visit new parks and be physically active and that people were very interested in the program.
- The partnership promoted the program in schools and at community events, but the program was not targeted toward any specific population.
- The program received more than \$40,000 in donated media coverage (i.e., radio, television) in addition to 40 written news pieces.



“Basically the word is out [about the Keystone Active Zone Passport Program]. Not to everybody, but it’s [out]. The program [is] absolutely phenomenal, very high profile, everybody knows about it... We’re going to rock the state.”
-Partner

▶ **State of the Trails**

- Prior to the ALbD grant, there was no single comprehensive resource listing for all local trails, largely because the trails were created by a number of small community-based non-profits.
- The partnership created the State of the Trails report, which listed every open (i.e., completed) or in-progress trail, along with trail characteristics, photos, trail lengths, parking options, and attractions.
- The maps were posted on the Luzerne County government website to provide a comprehensive and accessible resource.
- The report was presented to local decision makers in a variety of organizations.

▶ **A New You**

- One program, A New You: Prescription for Physical Activity, encouraged health care providers to prescribe physical activity to their patients. Grand Rounds presentations were given for health care providers at local hospitals.
- A local resource guide was given to recipients with prescriptions. The materials were shared with providers at several local health care facilities.
- The program was modeled after the prescription program of another ALbD grantee and was led by a workgroup that included Steps, Blue Cross of Northeast Pennsylvania, and a physician.

▶ **Take a Walk Today campaign**

- The “Take a Walk Today. So many places, so many reasons.” social marketing campaign provided themes for its many walking programs.
- The campaign was aimed at the general public and provided both a call to action to be more physically active and a reminder of the local treasures in Luzerne County.
- Messages were displayed on four area bus-boards and on the county outdoor recreation website.
- The campaign included a video with photographic stills from the local outdoor locations.

▶ **Website/Newsletter**

- The partnership website served as an important forum for updating and sharing information with the community.
- A regularly published Trails Walks and Events e-newsletter provided up-to-date information on outdoor activities in the community. The e-newsletter proved to be a successful promotion, with more and more community members and workplace wellness groups requesting to be included on the distribution list.
- Luzerne County Parks and Recreation’s website re-design featured photographs of residents being active in local parks and trails. The partnership provided these photographs in addition to a county-wide trail map and the State of the Trails report.

“The website is also important for ongoing contact with those interested in outdoor wellness activities and as a resource for information. The monthly listing of hikes and outdoor activities was also a useful reminder for participants.”
-Partner

▶ **Media Coverage**

- Many of its programs, including National Trails Day, Riverfest, and the Keystone Active Zone Passport Program, received significant media coverage, including radio spots, television spots, and magazine and newspaper ads and articles.
- The partnership worked with Steps to develop public service announcements that promoted walking.

“The media has been very kind to the trails organization. We have a couple of reporter friends who are outdoors people. So really anything that we’ve sent gets in.” -Partner

▶ **Walking Programs**

- Walk with Ease, a senior walking program sponsored by the Arthritis Foundation, organized walking groups for people with mobility challenges. Walks were held at different locations in Luzerne County twice a week for six weeks. In addition, the Kingston Senior Center offered organized hikes for older adults.
- The partnership worked with two local YMCAs to provide a teen hiking program in which the YMCAs transported lower-income teens to local state park trails.

▶ **Annual Events**

- Early in the ALbD grant, the partnership coordinated a bike safety event and trail ride on the Levee Trail with the Luzerne County Safe Kids Coalition. Bike derbies during the final years of the grant were held near the Levee trail, in urban parking lots, and at a local lower-income housing development. The events included a variety of activities, such as informational and promotional activities, bike and helmet inspections, bike safety instruction, parent information, and bike rides.
- With the Northeast Regional Office of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, the partnership sponsored National Trails Day, which aimed to connect communities to trails to promote trails and trail use. A number of community organizations provided opportunities to walk, bike, and hike at sites throughout Luzerne County. The event was promoted as a day for residents to experience the outdoors at a trail near them. Participants received incentives for attending. In the final year of the grant, over 300 people participated. The partnership distributed activity packets and incentives (e.g., water bottles, lanyards, sunscreen, raisins, pedometer, fitness logs, ponchos, nature education cards, safety tips).
- The partnership became involved in the annual Wyoming Valley Riverfest, a celebration of the natural environment. The partnership sponsor and plan the event, provided an informational booth. In the final year of the grant, over 1,000 people attended.
- The partnership promoted Walk to School days at two local schools using Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity materials. Approximately 400 students and parents participated by walking to school or walking around the school campus.



► **Promotional Materials**

- To complement the local library's summer reading program, "Discover New Trails," the partnership distributed a six-page packet that contained information about trails, access points, etiquette, safety, healthy eating, and physical activity.
- In collaboration with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Pennsylvania Parks and Recreation Society, the partnership created an Outdoor Play Everyday brochure aimed at families with young preschool age children. With assistance from Maternal and Family Health Services, over 25,000 brochures were distributed at WIC centers in 16 Pennsylvania counties.
- A number of other informational and promotional materials were distributed, including a pedometer activities sheet, a resource guide listing local trails, parks, recreational facilities, and other programs (with partner Steps), and a guide to street games using a Spalding pinkie ball (e.g., Four Square, Hit the Penny, A My Name is Alice).
- Steps distributed a regularly updated worksite wellness challenge and toolkit.

► **Community Forums and Presentations**

- Partnership staff educated municipal officials about active living and the many options for enhancing the quality of "place" through a Livable Communities workshop. A national walking advocate, Charles Gandy, generated excitement and credibility for the active-living movement by meeting with local trail development leaders and public officials to discuss local trails and share innovative ideas from other projects across the country. The workshop also included a place making exercise for the West Side Trail.
- The National Conference on the Small City brought planners from across the nation to Wilkes-Barre. As part of the event, architecture students designed five Active Small City of the Future models that depicted changes to the built environment in Wilkes-Barre that would facilitate active living.
- Partnership staff presented the health benefits of hiking at Pittston Intermediate School and Luzerne County Community College.
- National speakers were brought in from around the country to help promote active living. These speakers discussed what was happening around the nation, sharing success stories from other communities.
- The partnership's efforts were featured during the 2008 Pennsylvania Trails and Greenways Summit: Trails and Greenways, Youth Path to Active Living. The partnership was also featured in a Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity statewide webcast.

"It's so hard to market in a diverse, urban neighborhood like this. We don't have any one newspaper. Some people read the Spanish language newspaper, and some people read the big newspaper...some people have computers and some people don't have computers...there's no one place you can go and hang all of your flyers where everyone goes and gets it. You need multiple approaches, if you look at it that way, so you have to throw a ton of money at it..." -Partner

Strengths and Challenges

Staff, partners, and community members identified a number of facilitators for implementing programs and promotions:

- The partnership found that messaging centered on non-health benefits of physical activity, such as enjoying the outdoors, getting sunshine, spending time with family, and saving money were more motivating to residents than messages about the health benefits.
- Because many trails were still in development, the partnership expanded both project area and focus to include the promotion of other natural resources, such as parks, for places to be active.
- Because the population of the project area included rural, suburban, and urban areas, and spanned multiple generations, from children to older adults, the partnership learned to tailor its efforts to each audience.
- As residents increased their use of trails and parks through programs and promotional events, the demand and support for new trails and parks increased.
- The partnership's programs and promotions were essential for increasing awareness of new and existing trails and parks and facilitating community conversations about land use and health.
- The partnership was able to use the ALbD grant to create a comprehensive and united force to support active living and recreation in the community.
- The partnership was able to fill a role in rural communities and small towns, where local governments had limited resources and staff, by compiling information and creating promotional materials about local resources.

“And [the unfinished trails] really forced us to open our minds... We ended up, as I said, expanding not only geographically from the valley to the county but also expanding not just from rails-to-trails multiuse trails, which were kind of our original core partners, but also looking at state parks, county parks, and really promoting all of our natural places as places to go be active and be healthy. I think that that has been very successful because we are such a mixed area in terms of land use.” -Partner

“The message is different to different people. You’ve got to flip a trigger or switch or something and you can’t be a single message. It needs to be adapted to different audiences, and it needs to target different audiences at different times.” -Partner

“Because if you build it, it’s not necessarily true that they will come because they don’t know that it’s there... So you have to let people know that it’s there.” -Partner

“Promotion I think that is really where the partnership as a group of people has had an opportunity to shine because our role has been to take information about all of the other things that are going on and really kind of package it in one place.” -Staff

Staff, partners, and community members identified a number of challenges for implementing programs and promotions:

- Bike safety events were often poorly attended. The partnership found more people attended when the events were conducted in conjunction with youth-focused partners.
- It was difficult to sustain the teen hiking program during cold weather.
- The teen hiking program leaders were hesitant to take ownership of the program, often depending on partnership staff to select destinations and promote the program.
- The older-adult walking programs were dependent on the leadership of paid staff, which limited sustainability when staff turnover occurred.
- Because much of the project area was rural, the partnership had to rethink how to promote active living programs.
- The partnership found that community residents were sometimes resistant to messages focused on physical activity. Health was not a strong motivating factor to get residents outside and moving.
- Because developing a trail network takes a long time, the partnership found themselves promoting and planning programs for trails that were not yet constructed.
- While health care providers were open to counseling patients to reduce barriers for physical activity, they did not see themselves as advocates for active living principles in land use and planning.
- Small volunteer trail organizations did not have the interest or time to conduct large-scale or multi-site physical activity promotions.
- Certain populations had specific barriers for using the trail. Preschool children and some older adults had difficulty walking long distances. Older adults were also wary of uneven walking surfaces and had fears related to safety when encountering overgrown areas.
- The “walk and bike as part of daily travel” message did not resonate as well in suburban and rural areas, though an “enjoy the outdoors” message did.
- Two local health care providers who piloted the “A New You” prescription program noted that the existing intake procedure included an assessment of physical activity and expressed that adopting the current “A New You” prescription procedure would be duplicative and time-consuming.

“Some of the programs that are inherent to Active Living by Design, like walk to schools, [don’t work here]. Like myself, to walk to school my kids, would have to walk 18 miles. So, a lot of things that are wonderful programs that work in walkable communities, which is the whole point of this, they’re just not possible. They’re not feasible. They’re not even really worth discussing in some other areas.” -Staff

“One of the biggest challenges was that the trails were not yet on the ground and it’s hard to promote something that doesn’t exist yet.” -Partner

Sustainability

Though there was positive energy and support from the community, there were many questions surrounding the future of the partnership and plans to continue the movement. One of the biggest sustainability issues was finding a home for the partnership after the end of the ALbD grant. The lead agency was no longer willing to serve as an organizational home once grant funding ended.

“Well I think the challenge is who was going to coordinate that? Who will make it happen? And that’s always a challenge.” -Partner

“The biggest challenge is that we’re not a 501(c)3, and... that there is no really good home for this organization after the grant because our fiduciary is really more interested in more global issues, not just this county’s.” -Staff

Midway through the ALbD grant, the partnership used a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Special Opportunities grant to explore funding methods for a trails alliance and to determine how other trail networks fund alliances and maintain trails.

“I think that sometimes I have to agree with [our Project Manager] that when we go away... specifically if active living goes away, things are still happening.. The ball is rolling. And now in addition to what had been rolling before is the additional message that, “think about how you include a walkable community, think about how you include health”... It’s important to have that at the table and what additional resources that brings to you in terms of development.”
-Partner

The partnership was awarded a small grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to aid in its sustainability efforts. The work plan for sustainability included the creation of the Luzerne County Active Outdoor Alliance as a temporary home for the partnership to continue creating, advocating, and providing information on the outdoor places across the county, including trails that help people get active.

“That would take the activities of the partnership and really expand them in a way that... instead of just focusing on trails, looking at parks and trails and also our outfitters, our organization for businesses that rent bicycles and stuff like that, and to create in some ways almost a trade organization for them to promote our parks and trails and outdoor activities. And so they would continue doing the Passport Program and the walks and trail events list and National Trails Day and Riverfest... and so they would continue doing all of those things. And then the Wellness Trails Partnership is a place where health and trails and parks organizations can talk to each other about their joint goals maybe once or twice a year. [The partnership] would continue under the larger shield of the Luzerne County Active Outdoor Alliance.” -Staff

Partners and staff also hoped to work alongside complementary efforts to promote active transportation and recreation. Steps established LiveWell Luzerne, a community health partnership focused on the socio-environmental health model, and received an ACHIEVE grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to work with the Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry to create a revitalized, walkable, and attractive downtown.

Despite the questions surrounding the longevity of the partnership, partners and staff agreed that the active living movement would survive, in part, because of the ongoing and lasting impact of the trail network.

“The nice thing is that it will continue whether or not the partnership exists because the emphasis to do it is really local. It’s strongly local. The emphasis is to kind of tie [the trails] together and look at trail connectivity and to create kind in-town trail systems, trail and greenway master plans that tie in off-road trails and also on-road bicycle and pedestrian improvement.” -Staff

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