

How to Activate a Community: A Case Study of the Active Living by Design Partnership in Somerville, MA

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Introduction

Somerville, MA was awarded a 5-year Active Living by Design (ALbD) grant to "activate" the city through partnership and planning. In 2007, the Institute for Community Health undertook a 2-year mixed methods case study to identify active living efforts and their impact on Somerville in terms of programs, physical projects, policy changes, and physical activity behavior of residents. Guided by the Social Ecological Model and principals of community-based participatory research, the case study will characterize active living using individual, community and environmental data. To provide contrast, similar data is being collected from the adjoining community of Everett, MA, a city of comparable size, density, and demographics to Somerville.

Objectives for Presentation:

1. Present key accomplishments of the Somerville ALbD program.
2. Present descriptive data on a city transitioning to be more active.
3. Present evaluation methods and framework for interpreting the impact of the ALbD grant on "activating" Somerville.

Demographics

Somerville is situated just northwest of Boston, MA and is a diverse city of 77,000 immigrant, student, blue-collar and professional citizens. With approximately 4 square miles of land that is bisected by two major highways, Somerville is a dense city that faces challenges in promoting active living. The community of Everett, MA sits adjacent to Somerville and has similar diversity and serves as a good comparison community.

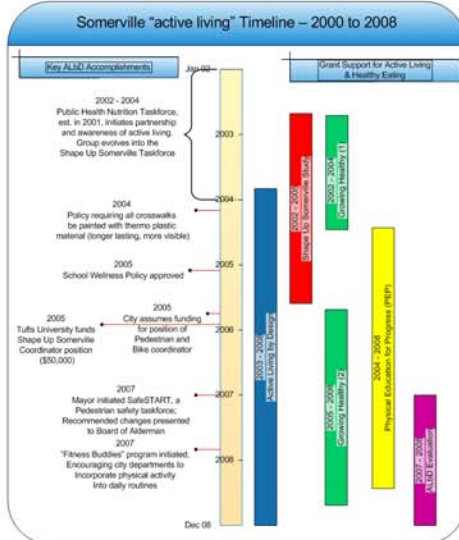
Somerville, MA, showing major traffic thoroughfares and plans for extension of the community walking/biking path



Demographics	Somerville	Everett
Population	77,000	38,037
Race/Ethnicity		
• African American	7%	6%
• Hispanic	9%	10%
• Asian	6%	3%
Density	18,780 residents per sq. mile	11,000 residents per sq. mile
Per Capita Income	\$23,628	\$19,845
Poverty Rate	12%	9.3%
Speak language other than English	36%	31%

Active Living by Design Program

Active Living by Design is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and is a part of the North Carolina Institute for Public Health at the UNC School of Public Health in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. This program establishes innovative approaches to increase physical activity through community design, public policies and communications strategies. Twenty-five communities across the country received 5-year grants (2003 through 2008) to impact physical activity using the RWJF "Community Action Model", shown here on the right.

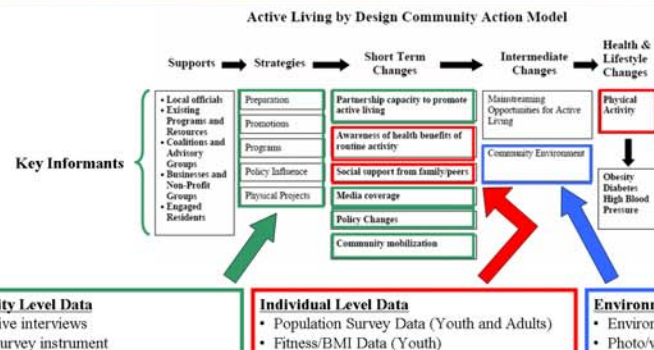


Program Highlight: ALbD taskforce developed and distributed Somerville walking maps, with information in 4 languages (Fall 2007)



The Somerville ALbD partnership continued efforts that began during the Shape Up Somerville intervention study, and the city continues to promote physical activity initiatives under that name. In addition to the major accomplishments listed in the timeline above, the city has secured support and funding to extend the Community Path, including acquiring 1.5 acres of land, \$600,000 for construction of a Community Path park, and assurance that the Path will be incorporated into future plans for the Green Line extension of the subway system.

Evaluation Methods and Framework



Individual Level Data

Select data from the Middle School Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) describes Somerville and Everett with respect to physical activity behaviors. Individual BMI and fitness data was also collected in both communities.

Individual Data	Somerville		Everett
	2003	2007	2007
4th - 8th graders who are obese (% >=95 percentile for BMI)	NA	26	30
Passed fitness endurance test (%)	NA	50	24
Met physical activity recommendations (moderate and/or vigorous) (%)	70	73	72
Watches 2+ hours of TV per day (%)	56	39	51
Has a TV in bedroom (%)	71	71	80
Has talked with parents or adults about nutrition and fitness (%)	58	72	NA
Visited the following places to play or be physically active: (times per week)			
• School Playground	NA	2.5	1.1
• Neighborhood Park	NA	1.7	1.0
• Walk/Bike Path	NA	2.2	1.9

Community Level Data

Key informant interviews and an online survey will help to better understand and describe the extent that Active Living "5P" activities were implemented in Somerville, and to assess organizational supports in both Somerville and Everett. Informants were chosen to represent a range of city-specific positions related to Active Living as well as some common positions shared between Somerville and Everett.



Environmental Level Data

The environmental observation component will assess environmental supports for active living through a range of data collection activities:

- **Walkability Checklists** assess safety, pleasantness, and room to walk, to be completed by parents of elementary students in both cities
- **Pedestrian Counts** characterize use of the Somerville walking/biking path and at sites along the route of proposed expansion
- **Environmental Audits** of pedestrian count locations using a validated tool will provide an objective measure of pedestrian locations
- **GIS Mapping Project** displays health outcomes, walking index, and other relevant built environment data across the city of Somerville
- **Photo/video Documentation** through a multi-media presentation to described the past, present, and future of the community path and its use

Next Steps: Analysis and Dissemination

Analysis Plan:

Individual-level data: Population-based surveys and measurements will be used to assess within-city (Somerville) trends in physical activity and fitness during the ALbD timeframe (2002-2008), and to assess between-city (Somerville and Everett) contrasts, incorporating trend information when it is available for both cities

Available Data Sources	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Adult BRFS	S						S, E
Middle School Survey (YRBS)		S		S, E		S, E	
High School Survey (YRBS)	S		S	E	S	E	S
Fitness Test Results (4-8 grade)						S	S, E
BMI (4-8 grade)						S	S, E

Community-level data: Interview transcripts will be analyzed using N6 software for themes related to implementing active living policies and activities and the barriers/promoters encountered in both cities. The online survey data will be analyzed to assess the capacity of each city to promote and support active living.

Environmental-level data: The environmental data (primarily from Somerville) will be mapped and summarized into themes to provide 1) a context for interpreting individual and community-level data, 2) baseline information to monitor changes over time, and 3) information for community-level active living planning

Dissemination Plan:

- **Community and advisory:** Share findings with ALbD and SUS Taskforces to guide sustainability planning and messaging, and with advisors for interpretation and modeling of data
- **National dissemination:** Prepare a manuscript of results and lessons learned for publication in peer-reviewed journal
- **Future studies:** Prepare a grant proposal for monitoring progress on active living in both cities