



## Case Study #2:

### The Promotion of Walking Routes, Walking Groups and Policy Changes in Indiana County, Pa.

#### Introduction

In his recent Call to Action, the U.S. Surgeon General appealed to Americans to be more physically active through walking; he calls on all of us to support walking and walkability as a strategy to improve the health of people of all ages and abilities and to promote optimal health before disease occurs. Further, the U.S. Surgeon General states that his goal for this Call to Action is for each of us to recognize and embrace our role in building the “great American community, a place where being physically active is not only easier but also more engaging and fun.”

While **WalkWorks** was initiated prior to the abovementioned Call to Action, the program epitomizes the U.S. Surgeon General’s intent. To effectuate its program, **WalkWorks** has engaged community-based partners to carry out myriad activities – all of which pay heed to increasing opportunities for physical activity – beginning with the designation of safe and fun walking routes and creating walking groups for the purpose of providing social support leading to behavioral and, ultimately, policy changes. Among the partners, and the subject of this case study, is the Indiana County Office of Planning and Development (herein referred to as ICOPD or “the County”).

**WalkWorks** strategically identifies its partners and locates its routes in school districts and communities in which data support the need for increased physical activity. Among the variables considered in selecting communities are: the 2010-11 school year highest quartiles of obese and overweight body mass index (BMI) percentages; low-income; academic performance; and participation in a CDC-funded grant to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease rates as health disparities often co-exist. According to the U.S. Census and 2014 County Health Rankings, rates of adult obesity and inactivity and the number of people living in poverty in Indiana County exceed the rates for all of Pennsylvania.

While Indiana County was among the targeted areas, ICOPD was not among the initial organizational entities invited to partner with **WalkWorks**. In fact, it was only by happenstance that there was a need for another partner at the time that ICOPD made an overture to the program. The appeal of partnering with ICOPD was and remains multi-fold and will become obvious throughout this illustration of the premise that early and methodical identification and engagement of members of the community – representing multiple disciplines – is vital to sustainability and, ultimately, policy changes in support of active transportation.

#### Issue

This case study will describe the process ICOPD has employed and/ or will be employing to promote walking routes, walking groups and policy changes. While a partner for only seven months, ICOPD has

acted swiftly and methodically, with its early outcomes already reflecting great success. ICOPD's accomplishments in this relatively short period of time, consideration of its other activities in Indiana County, as well as evidence-based programs related to physical activity, are the focus of this study.

### **Hypotheses**

Creative, local solutions tailored to specific community culture, geography, climate and needs are necessary when addressing rural active living. Bringing rural community members and stakeholders together can help initiate conversations and positive changes in communities.<sup>i</sup> In fact, the same would hold true for any community – rural, urban, and suburban.

When identifying barriers to and opportunities for active living, it is important to bring many different voices to the discussion. For strong public support and buy-in, input and collaboration are needed from community members and leaders, partners and stakeholders.<sup>ii</sup> This collaboration might include mayors, planners, public works departments, recreation department staff, school officials, church leaders, business owners, health care and public health professionals and advocates, architects, parents, senior citizens, and youth. These broad-based partnerships can help address rural-specific barriers to activity such as cultural differences, population size, limited human capital, and the challenge of connecting social and economic policies to health outcomes.<sup>iii</sup>

While walking groups are prescribed by **WalkWorks**, until recently, little was known about their effectiveness in promoting physical activity. Among recent studies are two which have assessed walking in groups as an intervention to promote physical activity among adults<sup>iv</sup> and the health benefits of outdoor walking groups.<sup>v</sup> In the first noted study, interventions to promote walking in groups were shown to be successful at increasing physical activity. Despite low homogeneity of results and other limitations (e.g., small number of studies using objective measures of physical activity, publication bias), which might influence the findings, the findings were deemed to be robust. The second study deemed walking groups to be effective and safe with good adherence and wide-ranging health benefits and, further, concluded that groups could be a promising intervention as an adjunct to other health care or as a proactive health-promoting activity.

### **Discussion**

This section presents salient factors of planning-related documents of Indiana County as they pertain to active transportation, a county-wide organization that has helped to lay the foundation for both actions and policy regarding bicycle and pedestrian options and, finally, the method ICOPD utilized to select the communities in which to develop walking routes. It is the amalgamation of these elements that makes this case study relevant to promoting walking and corresponding future policy.

- ❖ Planning-related documents – As previously mentioned, the work and philosophy of ICOPD – well before its partnership with **WalkWorks** – and activities within Indiana County are reflective of significant interest and commitment to physical activity, walking, walking routes, walking groups, and the need for relevant and meaningful policy. Such is evident when examining planning documents of the County. The following briefly describes relevant features of each of three plans:

- Where We Live ... A Comprehensive Plan for Indiana County, Pennsylvania – 2012<sup>vi</sup>  
“Where We Live” fosters a culture whereby bicycling and walking are well supported. Its transportation section specifically references the County’s Pedestrian & Bicyclist Transportation Plan, developed in conjunction with the comprehensive plan, which includes numerous and pertinent “community development objectives.” The plan has a “non-motorized” objective to accommodate bicycle and pedestrian transportation. The corresponding action item calls for implementation of the recommendations identified in both of the plans, below.

Also, indicative of its forward thinking and in support of walking as a means to improve health, the housing section of the comprehensive plan recommends fostering the creation of “well-designed developments and walkable and bikeable neighborhoods that offer healthy lifestyle opportunities for county residents.” The corresponding action item calls for amending subdivision and/or land development ordinances to require bicycle and pedestrian accommodations in conjunction with new and redevelopment projects.

Further, the plan’s land use section states that the way in which “the County will grow is directly related to the rules that regulate land development and standards for the infrastructure that support development,” acknowledging that such rules and standards dictate the width of streets and sidewalks, distances between building and streets, parking, and landscaping. While each may seem inconsequential on its own, they collectively influence the walkability of a community. Citing the need to encourage balanced transportation to effectuate physical activity, this plan not only calls for new residential developments to accommodate pedestrians, it proposes incentives in support of traditional neighborhood development patterns that have a pedestrian focus.

- More People Biking & Walking More Often; Pedestrian & Bicyclist Transportation Plan for Indiana County, Pennsylvania – 2011<sup>vii</sup>  
“More People Biking & Walking More Often” is an official policy document for Indiana County. It provides both policy and facility recommendations for improving bicycling and pedestrian conditions. Specific to this study, the plan recommends the following:
  - Designing streets that accommodate cars but also permitting residents to bike and walk safely and comfortably;
  - Developing communities of neighborhoods connected by sidewalks;
  - Making crossing streets safer and easier;
  - Developing a safe network of bicycling and walking routes that connect neighborhoods with popular destinations;
  - Encouraging increased physical activity;
  - Encouraging bicycle and pedestrian commuting;
  - Increasing public awareness of bicycling and walking through educational and community programs;
  - Developing bicycle and pedestrian route signage, maps and informational brochures;
  - Promoting economic development through bicycling and walking; and
  - Expanding recreational bicycling and pedestrian opportunities.

At least equally relevant as the above is the following list,\* outlining objectives for local governments in pedestrian and bicycle related projects:

- Adopting regulations that require the provision of sidewalks and bicycle facilities for all new development;
- Establishing a capital funding program that can be used to fund bicycle and pedestrian related projects or leverage state and federal grants;
- Instituting a public awareness campaign demonstrating the benefits of bicycling and walking;
- Providing leadership through the initiation and adoption of a comprehensive bicycle and pedestrian plan;
- Promoting coordinated activities that result in enhanced pedestrian and bicycle environments;
- Increasing the number of areas zoned as mixed-use development;
- Instituting a bicycle/pedestrian advisory committee or assigning responsibilities to an existing committee;
- Identifying sources of funding for bicycle and pedestrian projects; and
- Improving conditions along routes that bisect rural areas and act as an obstacle to bicycle and pedestrian movement.

\*The above is not all inclusive of the roles included in the plan. Rather, the above are intended to show evidence of the County's interest and commitment to active transportation and, specifically, walking.

Like the comprehensive plan, the County's Pedestrian & Bicyclist Transportation Plan provides a strong foundation for the promotion of walking routes and further policy development.

- Indiana County Open Space, Greenways and Trails Plan – 2010<sup>viii</sup>  
It is specifically stated that, among its purposes, this plan is intended to “promote healthy lifestyles” and “increase non-motorized mobility.” One of its related goals is to “enhance opportunities for physical, mental and spiritual wellness through expanded recreation opportunities.”

In addition to the above, it is worth noting the following plans as well: Southern Indiana County Cooperative Communities Comprehensive Plan – 2004 (Blairsville Borough, Homer City Borough, Black Lick Township, Burrell Township, Center Township); Clymer Borough Comprehensive Plan – 2000; and Clymer Borough Parks Master Plan – 2011. At the time of this writing, WalkWorks has two well-established routes located in the boroughs covered by the aforementioned plans: Blairsville and Homer City. Based on the dates of these plans and relationships that ICOPD has demonstrated, the opportunity to provide input to future plans and policies seems likely.

In summary, key plans of Indiana County provide significant support for the development and expansion of opportunities for active transportation – bicycling, walking and transit. The plans of all other counties and local municipalities, in which WalkWorks is located, have been examined; the emphasis on bicycling and walking is far greater in breadth and depth within the plans of Indiana County than in any of the others. That said, there remains an opportunity to incorporate more

definitive language pertaining to the health of the residents of Indiana County. Given the County's commitment to obtaining community input, as documented in the description of the planning process of the comprehensive plan, the concept of "health in all policies" is one that would likely be considered and even welcomed.

- ❖ Livable Indiana Neighborhood Connections (LINC) – LINC is an organization that was organized in 2000 and remains an active one, comprised of representatives from the private-sector, Indiana County Office of Planning & Development, Indiana County Parks, Cambria & Indiana Trail Council, Downtown Indiana, Welcome to Indiana, and Citizens for Alternative Transportation. Its vision is "...a more livable community by promoting healthy lifestyles and neighborhoods through increased bicycling and walking"; and its goal is "...to improve the quality of life for all residents by fostering the development of a more livable, connected community. Through cooperative efforts with municipalities, organizations and local citizens, LINC will help make Indiana more attractive, accessible and vibrant."

Among LINC's goals, strategies and tactics toward achieving the above-referenced goal and actualizing the organization's vision for Indiana County are the following:

- Goal  
Overall, LINC works to "design, construct, and maintain convenient bicycle and pedestrian facilities for safe and continued use...to coordinate and develop an interconnected network of bicycle and pedestrian routes that will link neighborhoods with destinations, such as employment centers, cultural amenities, schools, parks, etc."
- Strategy  
Establish pedestrian and bicycle "safeways" in Indiana. LINC defines safeways as greenways for people, designed to place pedestrians and bicyclists on an equal footing with automobiles. By designating some streets as safeway streets, a community establishes a system of pedestrian and bicycle friendly corridors. Recognized by motorized and non-motorized travelers alike, the safeway provides choice, allowing both motorized and non-motorized travelers to select routes that best support each kind of travel.
- Tactics
  - Create designated bicycle routes within the community
  - Implement pedestrian improvements within designated safeways and other areas with high levels of pedestrian use
  - Use "traffic calming" measures to place pedestrians and bicyclists on an equal footing with automobiles

The detail of the above is relevant to this case study, as it further documents the County's mindset and its commitment to physical activity. While the vision and related elements on LINC's website were developed 15 years ago, the organization continues to subscribe to them today. In fact, LINC is

another reason that Indiana County is the subject of this case study. It was on behalf of LINC that the deputy director of planning for ICOPD reached out to **WalkWorks** for the purpose of exploring a potential relationship. Both LINC and ICOPD were demonstrating commitment to a philosophy, in 2000, that is becoming increasingly pervasive in today's world among planning, health care and public health, transportation, and other professionals.

- ❖ ICOPD's Method of Selection and Promotion of Walking Routes and Groups – As evidenced in the content of its plans, its leadership role with LINC, and related activities, ICOPD has been conducting a proactive approach toward optimizing bicycle and pedestrian facilities – consistently – over a lengthy period of time. To ensure objectivity and inclusivity when selecting communities in which to create walking routes and sustainable walking groups, as well as an environment receptive to policy change, ICOPD established an advisory group of representatives – over and above a stakeholder group – to provide guidance on its **WalkWorks**-related efforts. (Note: ICOPD requested each community, in which a route is established, to form a stakeholder group.)

The process by which ICOPD has chosen to select communities in which to develop walking routes is one which has resulted in obvious success based on its initial choice – i.e., Blairsville, a borough located in the Blairsville-Saltsburg School District. That success is described in the conclusion of this study. The following outlines the due diligence employed by ICOPD to select Blairsville, as well as to identify the next three communities in which routes will be established:

- Relying on the comprehensive plan, a communication was sent to 14 boroughs and townships that were deemed to be growth communities – i.e., projected to increase in population and economy.
- In addition to the WalkWorks brochure, the communities were provided with maps of potential or suggested walking routes for their respective communities.
- A date was provided by which the parties were asked to indicate their interest; follow-up calls were made to those who had not responded (another example of the thorough and inclusive approach of ICOPD).
- To assess interest and capacity, telephone “interviews” were scheduled with those who responded; the following issues and questions were addressed/asked:
  - Describe your community's interest in walking.
  - Are there existing walking groups and, if so, how are you or your office involved with them or made aware of residents who might be interested in participating?
  - Can you think of a strong group leader?
  - One of the key components of the success of this project is the engagement of the community. How would you propose to engage people in the program?
  - Who do you see as potential stakeholders? Do you presently have relationships with schools, hospitals or others you think might be helpful in facilitating the program?
  - Do you have a route in mind and would there be an issue with signage?
  - Key deliverables include: establishment of the route, selection of a group leader, and a stakeholder group. What would be your 30day plan to produce these deliverables?

- A long-term goal of the project is to ensure (amend or adopt) policy. Do you envision being able to participate in having a positive influence on policy?

As in the case of the earlier section, related to the published and adopted plans of Indiana County, the details of the above process are relevant, as they provide a frame of reference with regard to how and why a community was selected, as well as how and why the selected community is already experiencing significant success. The proponent (and “winner”) of the route in Blairsville was the Blairsville Community Development Authority (BCDA). Based on its responses during the telephone interview, coupled with further discussion, it was evident that the BCDA had the capacity and commitment to fulfill the responsibilities of a partner for ICOPD. Why Blairsville has already shown evidence that it was a wise choice is addressed in the conclusion of this study.

### **Conclusion**

To truly understand and address barriers to walkability, it is critical to tap into the wisdom of the community – those who navigate their neighborhoods on a daily basis – and to connect them with the range of alternatives and solutions for creating safe, interesting, accessible, pleasant places to walk. In his Call to Action, the U.S. Surgeon General acknowledges the benefits of many groups needing to play roles in helping to ensure communities are safe, easy and desirable places to walk as part of our daily lives. Specifically, he suggests the following: transportation, land use, and community design; parks and recreational and fitness facilities; educational institutions; worksites; volunteer and non-profit organizations; health care; media; and public health. The ICOPD has, by convening multiple sectors (which LINC has done as well), yielded the needed support for solid walking routes and social support of active walking groups and will likely yield additional policy in support of increased opportunities for physical activity.

ICOPD’s success is due to a combination of myriad factors and activities. It is the foundation of the cited plans and their attention to active transportation; the presence and principles of LINC; the role of ICOPD in both the development of the plans and as a founding member and active participant of LINC; the philosophy of ICOPD to include multiple sectors of the community in its planning process; the ongoing relationship of ICOPD and BEDA; and the deliberate method of ICOPD employed to select a community in which to create a route – with due consideration to the potential for walking groups, as well as the interest and likelihood of the community to assist with influencing and changing policy.

Well ahead of schedule, 52 people attended the kick-off event for the Blairsville route – walking the route with enthusiasm and pride. Along their way, the walkers were stopped by passersby in cars and asked what they were doing! Since the kick-off, groups have been walking – one in the morning and another in the evening – five days a week. Twenty businesses, along the route, agreed to distribute brochures and to place posters in their windows. Staff of ICOPD have participated in “intro-walks” (in which members of the community are invited to walk a proposed route and provide input with regard to its potential), promoted **WalkWorks** by participating in and sharing information at public events (e.g., Blairsville Knotweed Festival), and continued to meet with representatives of the borough on a routine basis. In addition to ICOPD’s website and Facebook page, the borough manages a well-conceived and active Facebook posting for **WalkWorks** in Blairsville

(<https://www.facebook.com/BlairsvilleWalkworks/>). Also adding value to the success is ICOPD's request for the community to establish its own stakeholder group, rather than leave all of the oversight and recommendations to a countywide group. All of these activities support social intervention, another feature of **WalkWorks** deemed to be important to increasing the physical activity of the population. It is worth noting that, at the suggestion of ICOPD and BEDA, the mapped walking route – online as well as that which is provided to walking participants – reflects a bicycle route that corresponds to the walking route!

While it remains too soon to assess progress related to policy, examples of additional program strategies seemingly worthy of being incorporated are:

- ❖ A communitywide campaign to promote physical activity  
This might include identifying a champion in the media in order to ensure coverage, collaborating with a health care provider to offer risk factor screening and education and/or developing a relationship with a sporting goods store or a like entity, which would invite the public to hear experts speak on the safety aspects of driving while sharing the road with bicyclists or on techniques to improve one's walking performance.
- ❖ Individually-adapted health behavioral change programs  
Such programs, suggested in the U.S. Surgeon General's Call to Action, teach behavioral skills that help participants incorporate physical activity into their daily routines. These programs usually incorporate some form of counselling from a health professional or trainer to help participants set goals, monitor their progress, and suggest self-rewards to reinforce progress.
- ❖ Not-your-usual-walk-through-the-park  
This would offer regulars, as well as those who do not walk with a group on a routine basis, another "way," such as Nordic walking. In addition to just being fun for everyone, Nordic walking facilitates balance and helps to foster confidence after surgery, opening the walking group to a population that thinks they cannot keep up with a group.

Finally, this case study proves the hypotheses that creative solutions and processes, with due consideration given to attributes of the respective community, coupled with adherence to the policy of inclusion can result in safe, fun, accessible walking routes with committed walking groups. Other elements, such as the referenced plans and LINC, have been crucial in laying the foundation for success – noting that ICOPD has been either the lead or an active participant in developing and acting on both. Though not presently measuring the health status, informal testimonials of the "regulars" in Blairsville already reflect loss of weight and perceived improvement in health. ICOPD has implemented **WalkWorks** in such a way that, if adopted by others, the program stands out as one to emulate with regard to the promotion of walking routes, support for walking groups and the development of policy.



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- <sup>i</sup> Active Living Research, Promoting Active Living in Rural Communities, produced with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, September 2015.
- <sup>ii</sup> Edwards MB, Theriault DS, Shores KA, Melton KM. Promoting youth physical activity in rural southern communities: practitioner perceptions of environmental opportunities and barriers. *J Rural Health*.2014;30(4):379-387.
- <sup>iii</sup> Barnidge EK, Radvanyi C., Duggan K, Motton F, Wiggs I, Baker EA et al. Understanding and addressing barriers to implementation of environmental and policy interventions to support physical activity and healthy eating in rural communities. *J Rural Health*. 2013;29(1):97-105.
- <sup>iv</sup> Kassavou A, Turner, A, French, D. Do interventions to promote walking in groups increase physical activity? *Int. J. Behavior, Nutrition, and Physical Activity*, 2013.
- <sup>v</sup> Hanson, S and Jones, A. *Is there evidence that walking groups have health benefits?; a systematic review and meta- analysis*. Br J Sports Med, 2014.
- <sup>vi</sup> Where We Live...A Comprehensive Plan for Indiana County, Pennsylvania – Connecting people with each other, with communities and with the countryside; [http://icopd.org/assets/countycompplan\\_complete.pdf](http://icopd.org/assets/countycompplan_complete.pdf).
- <sup>vii</sup> More People Biking & Walking More often – Pedestrian & Cyclist Plan for Indiana County, Pennsylvania; <http://icopd.org/assets/pedestrian-bicyclist-transportation-plan-for-indiana-county.pdf>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Indiana County Open Space, Greenways and Trail Plan; [http://icopd.org/assets/2025\\_greenways-plan-final.pdf](http://icopd.org/assets/2025_greenways-plan-final.pdf).

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