

# WellSpring

## Healthy Active Communities: Creating Change in Your Community

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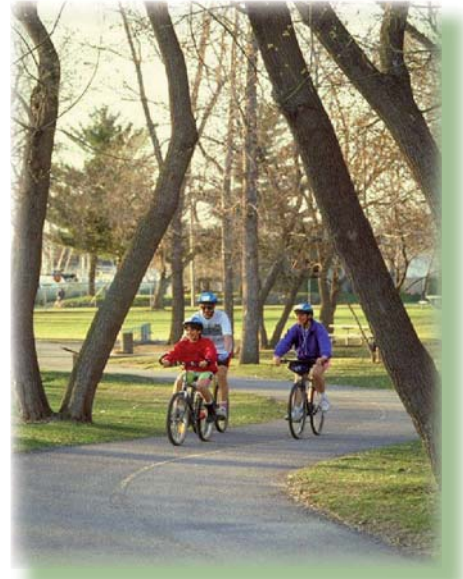
### Defining a Healthy Active Community

What does the phrase healthy active community mean to you? Do you think of families biking together on the trails, friends walking to a coffee shop, or kids playing at the local pool or ice rink? In other words, happy and healthy people of all ages, abilities and cultures who are actively involved in their community?

Carol Petersen, Active Communities Manager for the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association, says a healthy active community involves more than being physically active. "It's about the relationships that bring individuals together to create positive change in their neighbourhood," she says. "It's also about being involved in your community, engaging others and creating supportive environments to help others become active."

### What's in This Article for You?

- Defining a Healthy Active Community
- Leadership and Partnerships: The Key to Community Development
- Community Development: The Planning Process
- Thinking in Broad Terms But Starting with Specifics



The word community often refers to individuals who live in a particular place. Together, these individuals make up groups that share common activities, interests and beliefs. They are bound not only by their location but also by loyalty, common values and personal concerns (Brint, 2001).

The concept of community offers many appealing factors, including familiarity, safety, social relationships, belonging and being appreciated by the larger group. It is symbolic of people's aspirations (Brint, 2001).

A community's physical and socio-cultural environment can play a large role in the behaviour of citizens and in turn their quality of life and health (Humpel et al., 2002; Perdue et al., 2003; Sallis et al., 2006). The physical environment can be trails, parks, roadways, facilities and even access to facilities. The socio-cultural



environment is influenced by socio-economic status, safety, attitudes and culture.

For example, research has shown that perceptions of safety can be a barrier to being active (Miles, 2008; Roman and Chalfin, 2008). A mother who does not feel her community is safe will likely not allow her children to walk to school, play outside or form close friendships with neighbouring children and community members.

The Alberta Recreation and Parks Association (ARPA) is trying to provide direction to people who are interested in making their communities more healthy and active. ARPA's three-year initiative, Alberta Active Communities, began in 2006, has this goal: "To strengthen leadership capacity to build creative, healthier and more active communities through recreation and parks."

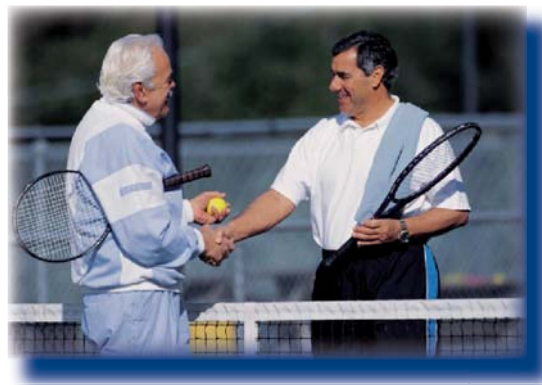
ARPA selected 10 diverse communities to participate in Alberta Active Communities and is facilitating their efforts by providing focus groups, training, coaching, tool kits, resources and an online communication hub. This facilitation process allows the communities to determine for themselves what is important and what needs to be done.

### **Leadership and Partnerships: The Key to Community Development**

The Alberta Active Communities initiative has been and will continue to be a learning process for the communities involved, and also for the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association. Petersen and her team initially struggled with a starting point. "To facilitate change you need to dialogue with a community," she says, "but how do you talk to a community?" It was determined that you still need to communicate with individuals, particularly the community leaders. "Without leaders, change cannot happen," Petersen says.

Interestingly, Petersen notes, many individuals who

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choose to step up and play a role in the development of their community do not see themselves as leaders. Petersen often tells them, "If you have a vision, if you want to challenge the status quo, if you want change, then you are a leader."

Community leaders come from a variety of backgrounds. Often they are in fields such as health care, recreation and fitness. Or they are elected officials and people who work in the private sector. Community leaders know their community well. Also, they can see the benefit of sustainable change and are willing to commit to it.

The leadership role is often shared among several people in a community. "We encourage the communities to develop a coalition of diverse individuals," Petersen says. For example, a coalition in your community could consist of healthcare providers, teachers, recreation leaders and other citizens.

Research findings (Laverack, 2006) indicate that developing relationships and partnerships within a community is important for success and sustainability. A multi-disciplinary team can share the work and the vision. As well, Petersen sees another advantage to working as a team. "You'll see more opportunities, become more creative and have greater access to resources."

Another important feature of community development is engaging and having representation from different groups of citizens. The voices of older adults, youth, cultural groups, low-income families and other groups are often not heard. Involving a diverse group of people in the planning process can encourage communication and allow common interests and values to develop (Laverack, 2006).

A community that establishes a long-term investment in participation and ownership by as many community members as possible is more likely to be able to make positive and sustainable changes.

### **Community Development: The Planning Process**

Striving to develop a healthy active community can be an overwhelming task, even when there is strong community support. The desired outcome is to have a community that is more physically active and has citizens more involved in their community. But how do you get there?

The Alberta Active Communities initiative has developed a Community Development Planning Process that guides leaders in the development of a shared plan for their community. As participating communities work through this process, the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association is learning more about which steps in the process are the most important. Some of the most crucial steps are not always included in a traditional planning model.

Following are some of the extra and crucial steps that help to ensure success.

- 1. Ignite and invite others to plan.** Develop diverse and multi-disciplinary relationships in your community.
- 2. Scan your community and celebrate its assets.** This very important step allows communities to assess themselves, and it “gets people talking.” The assessment process helps communities to:
  - a. learn about the opportunities, services, facilities and programs that already exist and celebrate these assets
  - b. identify barriers and gaps
- 3. Determine the type of plan to be developed.** What is a priority for your community? Where will your focus lie? Each community is different. One community may focus on connecting and maintaining walking trails while another looks at increasing access to facilities by means of public transportation.
- 4. Engage partners and stakeholders.** Sell your plan to the people who need to be engaged in order for it to succeed.

Community development is a circular process, with no clear beginning or end. So think big but start small and celebrate all accomplishments. Every step is a step towards change.

The literature supports the importance of a community self-assessment (Laverack, 2006; Nasar, 2008). Completing a self-assessment helps communities to learn about opportunities that already exist and issues they may have to deal with.

Drawing on what has been learned through the Alberta Active Communities initiative, the Alberta Recreation and Parks Association has drafted a comprehensive Community Assessment (Dialogue) Tool. Other assessment tools are also readily available, for example, bikeability and walkability checklists. Petersen recommends having a variety of groups and different types of citizens complete the assessment tool(s).

Petersen also points out that dialogue among the groups is critical. This process will help community members to identify common concerns and at the same time increase their awareness of issues and barriers that particular groups are facing.

### **Thinking in Broad Terms But Starting with Specifics**

Many fitness professionals, nurses, teachers, therapists and other similar practitioners are potential community leaders. However, their educational and professional experience has taught them to focus on individual patients or clients, or on small groups. Often, the focus of their work is on helping an individual to become more active and well. It is not surprising, then, that the idea of changing a whole community can be mind-boggling for these types of leaders.

To think beyond the individual and towards population health, take a step back. Look at the social determinants of health (income, culture, literacy, etc) and seek to understand how physical and socio-cultural environments have an impact on people.

There is another difference that professionals who become community leaders need to understand:

community development is ongoing. It is not like a program or a class that has a beginning and an end. To effectively deal with this challenge, it is best to think broadly but start with a specific idea or goal.

To begin:

- **Build relationships.** Get people talking and meet others who work in different disciplines. Talk about your values and dreams for the community. You may be surprised to learn that many others feel as you do.
- **Make your case over and over again.** Communicate a simple and clear message to as many people as possible. Try to educate and create positive attitudes about the value of physical activity and a healthy community.
- **Participate and be a healthy lifestyle role model.** Lead by example. Go for walks in your community. Take part in or volunteer with community programs and services.
- **Facilitate quality opportunities.** Do your programs create outcomes that people in your community value? Are your programs accessible to all? Do they promote physical activity, healthy eating, self-esteem and wellness? Rather than creating programs, why not revamp the ones currently in place so as to reflect these values?
- **Ensure access.** You can offer first-rate opportunities, services and programs, but without participation no benefits will be derived.
- **Celebrate progress:** Since moving towards a healthy active community is an ongoing process, it's important to celebrate even the little accomplishments along the way. Perhaps this year you were able to reach the older adults in the community, or you created a walk-to-school-program.

Most people agree that strong, vibrant and active communities contribute to our quality of life and overall health. However, the definition of a healthy active community is different for each community.

“Change is possible,” Petersen says, “but it cannot occur without strong leadership, trusting relationships and diverse partners.” Take the extra steps required to engage others and learn about opportunities and barriers in your unique community. This is the way to achieve sustainable change.

Community development is a circular process, with no clear beginning or end. So think big but start small and celebrate all accomplishments. Every step is a step towards change.

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## Mission Statement of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of all people through physical activity.

#### IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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