

## **MAKING THE ALLENTOWN COMMUNITY A HEALTHIER PLACE TO LIVE**

*City mobilizes to improve school physical education and connect an isolated set of trails*

### **Public Health Problem**

- Lack of physical activity is a major contributor to the country's epidemic of obesity and other chronic diseases.
- While health programs are a necessary strategy for reducing disease risk factors and complications, environment and policy changes may be more effective to stem the tide of costly chronic diseases.

### **Program**

- With funding from an Action Communities for Health Innovation and Environmental Change (ACHIEVE) grant, Allentown formed a Community Health Action Response Team which trained at an Action Institute to apply an effective model for improving the health of their community's urban environment. ACHIEVE funding is distributed competitively by the YMCA of the USA and the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors.
- Local decision makers such as the mayor, representatives of other city government departments, the school board, churches, non-profit organizations and hospitals organized to develop a Community Action Plan and act as a team with the help of three 'coaches' representing the YMCA, the health department and the community at large.
- Using a recommended "CHANGE Tool" to assess the community the team identified needed changes to the health environment, prioritized this list and decided on two major goals: 1) to increase physical activity before, during and/or after school using supportive steps from the CDC School-Based Physical Education Action Guide and 2) to connect walking and biking trails for improved usability, a goal that will be strengthened by pursuing a Complete Streets Policy to connect trails and provide vital bicycle and pedestrian links to the inner city.

### **Impact**

- City decision makers now have an agreed-upon, unified vision of a 'healthier' environment for their community that emphasizes opportunities for physical activity.
- Isolated walking and biking trails are now part of a plan for improvement that includes a feasibility study and specific steps for identifying funding to build a trail network that's more usable for community residents.
- A serious youth problem – almost half of Allentown students are overweight or obese – is getting attention from school decision makers in a project to implement a more 'fitness-oriented' physical education curriculum.
- Community pride resulting from this ACHIEVE process is celebrated through placement of signs in a centralized park identifying Allentown as an ACHIEVE community.

### **Contact**

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