

West Virginia: Building a Statewide Plan for Physically Active Lifestyles

In 2012, West Virginia released [ActiveWV 2015: The WV Physical Activity Plan](#), taking a significant step toward facilitating positive change in the lifestyles of its residents. Modeled after the National Physical Activity Plan, *ActiveWV 2015* provides a strategic direction for physical activity promotion within the state and is organized around eight sectors identified as key contributors to promoting physical activity as a public health priority. The plan was developed with the input of more than 150 individuals from different societal sectors and geographic regions within West Virginia. The plan's implementation is expected to increase the physical activity levels of children and adults in West Virginia to meet or exceed the recommendations in the [Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#), thus improving residents' health and quality of life.

Overview

West Virginia has one of the highest obesity rates in the country, ranking sixth in the nation. It also ranks first in the prevalence of heart attacks and second for diabetes. Physical activity is a key factor in preventing obesity and chronic disease, and adults in West Virginia are generally inactive—ranking second in the nation for physical inactivity. Changing a statewide culture of inactivity is difficult, but it is particularly challenging in a primarily rural state like West Virginia where two-thirds of its population lives in communities of less than 2,500 people and more than half of the state is considered economically distressed. Research has shown that in general, rural residents are less physically active than urban residents. Possible reasons include less access to exercise facilities and fewer school physical education classes, limited walkability, challenges of the “built environment” (lack of sidewalks, parks, and other aspects of a community).

Although high chronic disease rates and low physical activity problems have existed for quite some time, West Virginia has only recently begun a coordinated, multifaceted effort to address physical inactivity. *ActiveWV 2015* pulls together eight societal sectors to promote physical activity opportunities and participation. The sectors include:

- Healthcare.
- Public health.
- Education.
- Business and industry.
- Mass media.
- Parks and recreation, fitness, and sports.
- Transportation, land use, and community design.
- Nonprofit and volunteer organizations.

The impetus for *ActiveWV 2015* came from the [National Physical Activity Plan](#) (NPAP), a comprehensive set of policies, programs, and initiatives that aim to increase physical activity in all population sectors. NPAP calls for states to formulate state-specific plans, focusing on environmental, systems, and policy change. West Virginia took NPAP's framework and adapted it to better meet the state's unique needs and challenges. The plan aims "to create a statewide culture that facilitates physically active lifestyles in every societal sector and in every region of the state, regardless of socio-demographic factors, or other barriers we may face."

Steps Taken

ActiveWV 2015 is truly a plan developed by the people, for the people. Discussions about the need for a state-specific plan began shortly after NPAP's release in 2010. The West Virginia University (WVU) College of Physical Activity and Sports Science, WVU School of Medicine's CARDIAC Project, and West Virginia on the Move, a nonprofit organization, convened a group of interested persons to study the development of NPAP, develop the aim of the West Virginia plan, and conceptualize a strategic direction involving all eight sectors mentioned previously. Together, these three organizations hosted the 2010 West Virginia Physical Activity Symposium, a statewide meeting that brought together a diverse collection of nearly 250 practitioners, organizations, agencies, and policymakers to share about increasing opportunities for physical activity across all ages. The symposium aimed to (1) educate partners about NPAP and the various sectors, (2) build awareness and support for a statewide strategic plan for physical activity, and (3) highlight best practice programs and initiatives for increasing physical activity.

The symposium provided an opportunity to outline the necessary steps for plan development, discuss common barriers to physical activity for West Virginia's communities and residents, and identify stakeholders. Following the symposium, members of the core team from WVU and West Virginia on the Move began to meet with and present to key stakeholders, which helped to both gain policy leaders' support and acquire funding. As a result, the core team secured grants from two local foundations, along with a WVU Grant for Public Service, to make the concept a reality.

To develop the actual plan, collaborators facilitated a group decision making process to establish the plan's conceptual framework. Plan developers held a webinar to inform potential contributors about the WV Physical Activity Plan and invite their input. They solicited ideas via a multi-phase concept mapping process that included brainstorming, structuring ideas through expert rating and sorting, and having key stakeholders interpret results. The concept mapping data was collected using a web-based format that allowed contributors from diverse geographic locations across the state to participate. More than 150 individuals participated, representing all eight sectors and various state regions.

WVU and West Virginia on the Move recruited 32 experts from the eight societal sectors to assist with sorting and rating ideas generated in the brainstorming process based on importance to statewide

physical activity promotion and feasibility. Maps, cluster analysis, and data aggregation were used to help identify five priority areas that provided the plan's conceptual framework:

- School-based programs and initiatives.
- Public awareness and social marketing.
- Community engagement and environment.
- Institutional and organizational support.
- Policy.

Plan developers organized sector teams, comprised of a total of 72 experts representing all eight sectors, and asked them to develop sector-specific [calls to action](#) and strategies within each priority area, using the results from the brainstorming exercise and the NPAP strategies as a point of reference. The West Virginia Bureau for Public Health spearheaded developing the public health sector plan, which focuses on opportunities to promote physical activity through advocacy, education for greater personal responsibility, policy, the adoption of evidence-based practices, and surveillance and research.

The eight sector strategies and tactics were compiled into a preliminary draft that was released for public comment in fall 2011. Developers incorporated comments and feedback into a final report, executive summary, and fact sheets. [ActiveWV 2015: The WV Physical Activity Plan](#) was released on Jan. 19, 2012, amidst celebratory events at the state capitol with dignitaries and stakeholders. During the event, 44 county resolutions and a gubernatorial proclamation around physical activity were signed, and there was a coordinated statewide line dance by more than 100,000 West Virginia students, as well as extensive media coverage throughout the state.

Results

WVU is guiding the implementation and dissemination of ActiveWV 2015, and the WVU College of Physical Activity and Sports Sciences is providing administrative oversight. The [implementation plan](#) focuses on the priority areas, strategies, tactics, and messages recommended across the eight sectors. This includes support for programming at the local level, a statewide cause marketing campaign, and advocacy efforts related to physical activity policy. Examples of implementation activities include multi-year programs to provide resources and support to pre-K through 12th grade schools seeking to establish comprehensive school physical activity programs and a public awareness and social marketing campaign to promote physical activity using the people, programs, and places of West Virginia. Other examples include providing resources for primary care physicians interested in writing physical activity prescriptions based on use of local and state parks.

ActiveWV 2015 provides critical guidance to both state and local policymakers around the steps necessary to foster a culture that promotes physically active lifestyles in every societal sector. It has been widely disseminated, and positive developments have already been seen in various sectors. For example, the governor recently announced a new partnership with the National Foundation for

Governors' Fitness Councils around the use of new and unique methods to promote student physical activity and wellness in West Virginia schools. Plans are underway to establish a web-based portal that will map all state resources related to physical activity, including places, programs, and professionals, along with a related online clearinghouse of evidence-based physical activity resources for local community leaders.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned that could help guide other states and districts in developing their own comprehensive physical activity plans include the following:

- Create an action plan by identifying objectives, organizational structure, financial needs, and stakeholders, along with clear roles, responsibilities, and timelines.
- Solicit input and buy-in from all societal sectors, geographic regions, and major stakeholders.
- Secure support early from key policy and governmental officials from all sectors.
- Chose a unified team of dedicated and visionary sector leaders with the ability to lead and the capacity to commit resources to the planning, implementation, and evaluation process.
- Obtain sector-specific feedback after all planning activities to assess the process, outcomes, and impacts of the plan.

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