Walking as a Way for Americans to Get the Recommended Amount of Physical Activity for Health

Comments Prepared by Prevention Institute
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Prevention Institute thanks the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for the opportunity to comment on effective, evidence-based strategies for increasing physical activity through a focus on walking. Walking is the most prevalent form of physical activity, and attention to the environmental and policy factors that support safe walking holds great promise for improving health and safety outcomes across diverse populations.

As a national focal point for prevention practice, Prevention Institute works with government, foundations, advocacy groups and community based organizations to improve health and safety outcomes through a focus on preventing illnesses and injuries before they occur. In our 15 year history, we have promulgated policies, practices and generated support for walking. In recent years, we have witnessed an upsurge in attention to walking as a key strategy for unintentional injury prevention practitioners, as well as those working to promote physical activity and prevent inactivity related chronic conditions. More recently, we’ve forged new territory by looking at the links between community safety, violence prevention and walking and believe this intersection represents fertile territory to build greater collaboration between violence prevention and chronic disease prevention practitioners.

Across the United States, innovative strategies to support and promote walking in diverse communities have begun to emerge. Notably, key groups such as the National Convergence Funders Partnership, the National Safe Routes to School Partnership, the Strategic Alliance for Healthy Food and Activity Environments, along with locally-grounded initiatives such as The California Endowment’s Healthy Eating Active Communities grantees, Kaiser Permanente’s Healthy Eating, Active Living grantees as well as federally funded groups working at the local and/or regional level (such as Communities Putting Prevention to Work grantees) have demonstrated success. Much of this work is documented on Prevention Institute’s website at www.preventioninstitute.org. A list of links to community profiles and relevant publications is included at the end of our comments for further review.

A national effort to promote walking, increase physical activity levels and help Americans sustain appropriate levels of physical activity will require attention to the quality and safety of the places where people walk. Given Prevention Institute’s focus on three core principles: 1) prevention, first, 2) equity for
all; and, 3) population-level improvements, we have honed our comments to highlight four inter-related domains that will be critical for improving nationwide outcomes:

1. Cultivate Leadership and Shared Vision
2. Foster Inter-sectoral Collaboration
4. Address Community Safety: A key to walking

1. Cultivate Leadership and Shared Vision
It is essential that high level leadership from key agencies, institutions and organizations commit to creating policy changes that make safe walking and walkable environments a reality for all communities, helping to increase the percentage of Americans who move. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is uniquely positioned to play a powerful role in promoting evidence based and promising practices that create safe walking environments. Through its ability to direct and guide funding, identify research needs, engage in media campaigns and influence strategy development at the regional or local level, the CDC can establish clear leadership and provide a shared strategic direction through:

- **A Focus on Primary Prevention and Equity Across Efforts**: Initiatives like Communities Putting Prevention to Work, Community Transformation Grants, Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health and ACHIEVE have provided local agencies with the opportunity to engage a wide array of sectors in long term strategies that move beyond a focus on the individual and elevate environmental strategies that support population health. In particular, efforts to develop strategies for low-income communities and communities of color have emerged as promising approaches to increase opportunities to walk safely in historically disadvantaged communities.

- **Leverage the health perspective to support local/regional innovation**: Decisions about the sidewalks people walk on or the destinations where they can walk are strongly influenced by local and regional decision-making, funding and resource allocation. The health perspective in local and regional decisions can catalyze innovative actions that improve community planning, land use and design by ensuring that health data are applied when determining how and where to design walkable destinations – for example, to general plans, land use decisions and resource allocations. Insist on environmental and infrastructure improvements in communities that need them most: While programs that give away pedometers, and promote walking through social support and community-wide walking events have demonstrated increases in walking among intervention groups, these kinds of changes alone are not enough. Programmatic, educational and promotional events should complement physical improvements and modifications to budgetary and planning processes that determine how and where physical changes are made. People require safe places to walk and desirable destinations to walk to. If our goal is to truly increase physical activity levels and sustain them, communities must be built and designed to be walkable. Environment matters.

- **Maintain and strengthen linkages to healthy food access efforts**: Healthy food and physical activity environments are critical determinants of diet- and inactivity-related illnesses (e.g., diabetes, cardiovascular disease, etc.). Efforts to advance walking should aim to generate synergy with strategies to increase equitable access to healthy food. Food retail and community gardens can serve as a key destination for walkers and it is critical that those working to increase access to healthy food are attuned to some of the core strategies to promote walking.

2. Foster Inter-sectoral Collaboration
Walking is not just a health issue; it is a safety concern, and the most prevalent form of active
transportation -- and a critical alternative to motorized travel, thus making it an environmental issue as well. The determinants of walking touch on many sectors. Therefore, a nationwide effort to increase walking will require engagement of diverse disciplines (within DHHS), as well as key sectors involved in shaping walking environments. Specifically, the Department of Transportation, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Bureau of the Interior are among those which have a vital role to play in improving walking outcomes in the US. The Surgeon General’s Call to Action should lay out a framework for inter-sectoral collaboration at many levels of government by doing the following:

- **Promote and Reward Collaboration** - state and local agencies should commit to better cross-agency collaboration and integration of programs and policies for collective impact. For example, initiatives like the Federal Sustainable Communities Initiative that bring together non-health sectors and agencies (HUD, ETA, DOT) amplify health efforts and can serve as a model for other initiatives. The Center can encourage partner agencies to incorporating walking into their organizational practices and implementation plans.

- **Build Capacity for Inter-sectoral Collaboration**: Engaging partners from diverse fields and sectors can be challenging, but well worth it. It can bring a breadth and depth of knowledge and skills for advancing meaningful environmental change, and spark new ideas and ways of working that might otherwise be overlooked. Prevention Institute’s [Collaboration Multiplier](#) is a useful and tested tool that offers agencies and advocates a framework for identifying specific community needs and developing key partnerships. By identifying shared strategies, drawing out important differences in resources and areas of expertise as well as by analyzing opportunities for synergy, this tool can offer your efforts a foundation by which to engage new partners and stakeholders.

3. **Promulgate Policies and Practices that Support Walking**

Prevention Institute urges that the upcoming Call to Action should highlight and promulgate policies and practices that create safe infrastructure for walking, support the development of key destinations including healthy food retail and community gardens, and promote positive norms and environmental cues for this behavior. Again, educational efforts and programs are valuable but they are not sufficient in creating sustainable, lasting change. To create an enduring national effort that supports and sustains walking, it is vital that all communities in the US live, work and play with infrastructure that supports safe walking for pleasure, recreation, errands, and commuting. Our scan of the evidence indicates some key strategies worth emphasizing:

- **Community Planning and Development**: Street infrastructure and transportation decisions that prioritize walking can increase physical activity and allow for safe non-motorized transport, as well as increase overall street safety for bikers and cars.

- **Complete Streets and Complete Neighborhoods**: Complete streets are those that provide opportunities for safe walking alongside (or safely separated from) bikes and cars. This strategy also supports the efforts of disability advocates to provide all users with access to safe infrastructure and opportunities to move around. Complete-neighborhoods that include a mix of quality jobs, schools, and health-promoting features in the built environment, such as healthy food options and physical activity opportunities, can also support walking as a primary mode of transportation. Such neighborhoods are associated with greater walkability and lower body mass indexes (BMIs), both of which are associated with chronic disease prevention.
• **Community Design Standards** provide established design principles via language and technical drawings included in master plans, street design guidelines, and ordinances for a given municipality. These principles guide the development of future transportation projects that can be set up to prioritize the development of infrastructure to support walking and activity (e.g., development code may mandate that new street construction include bike lanes and sidewalks of a certain width whenever possible).

• **Transit-oriented development (TOD):** TOD is an emerging model that creates housing, retail, and/or commercial development and amenities integrated into a walkable and bikeable neighborhood and located within a half-mile of affordable public transportation. This strategy seeks to connect to housing, employment, public transit, healthcare, healthy food retail, and other community resources, loan programs, affordable housing and community engagement are ways to pay special attention to preventing displacement of low-income residents and people of color.

• **Mixed-use zoning:** zoning that emphasizes a deliberate mix of housing, civic uses, and commercial uses including retail, restaurants, and offices can support walking by creating key destination areas accessible by active transportation. This strategy can further bridge the promotion of physical activity efforts with those of advocates seeking to increase and promote health food access by connecting walking with key destination areas like grocery stores, community gardens and farmer’s markets. Commonly implemented at the most local level of government, zoning is a land use regulation that dictates what kind of development can be placed on a parcel of land as well as its density, height, use, and building characteristics. A focus on locally-owned, small businesses, affordable rents / housing, and loan programs can be used to prevent undesirable impacts such as displacement, forced gentrification or negative changes to community character.

Emerging evidence suggests that while the accessibility of safe streets and sidewalks greatly contributes to increased rates of walking, community walkability also benefits from availability of pathways and connections to destinations of interest. Providing communities with opportunities to walk to schools, workplaces, recreational spaces, healthy food outlets, etc can support higher levels of physical activity. By partnering with non-health stakeholders who share a commitment to activity and the outdoors, including national park associations, conservancy and environmental groups, health-focused agencies can leverage resources to maximize access to parks, trails and green spaces:

• **Increase access to trails and pathways:** Access to recreational facilities and open green space is associated with attainment of federal recommended levels of physical activity. Trails and pathways present a great opportunity to facilitate the incorporation of physical activity into a daily routines and commutes by connecting neighborhoods, parks, schools and workplaces. Encouraging states and municipalities to finance new trails and pathways, improve the safety and convenience of existing pathways, as well as secure funding mechanisms to maintain these community resources will be important in creating environments that support walking and activity.

• **Joint Use Agreements in park-poor communities:** For communities lacking access to parks, trails and other physical activity facilities, maximizing the use of existing community resources and infrastructure through joint or shared use agreements can encourage communities to engage in increased physical activity. Joint use agreements that increase access to school facilities can open green spaces and walking tracks to the community and support increased walking opportunities.
• **Equitable School-Siting**: Placement and renovation of schools already located in neighborhoods so that students can easily walk or bicycle, or when building new schools, ensure that they are located in areas that are easily accessible by walking, bicycling, and public transit. For low income communities, establishing educational institutions within neighborhoods facilitates greater walking and bicycling to school.

4. **Address Community Safety: A key to walking**

Ensuring that walking can take place in a safe and inviting environment is key to increasing rates of physical activity. Fear of being injured, disabled or killed because of a lack of infrastructure or exposure to community violence must be addressed in a comprehensive manner. Across the U.S., low-income residents without access to personal automobiles rely on walking as a primary mode of transportation. Often the communities they reside in lack the infrastructure needed to protect their safety during activity, making it more likely for them to be struck by vehicles. Older adults and people with disabilities, children, and other vulnerable populations also face safety-related transportation challenges, resulting in isolation and limited access to services. Injury prevention strategies that support walking include:

- **Equity-focused Investment of Resources**: State and federal resources - technical assistance, funding and infrastructure should be prioritized in underserved areas and those with high crash rates.

- **Safe Routes To School (SRTS) Infrastructure Policies and Programs**: SRTS creates safe and convenient opportunities for children of all abilities to use active transportation to travel to and from school through pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure improvements, speed reductions in areas near schools, and other complementary strategies.

- **Traffic-calming and road design**: Measures that acknowledge the relationship between environmental design and behavioral norms, and encompass many of the most important injury prevention strategies including: reduction of lane widths, curb cuts and bulb-outs, curving streets and enhancing roadways with greenery.

Community violence also presents a strong barrier to accessing to safe physical activity and is, especially prevalent in communities burdened with high rates of violence. As walking strategies are employed, there is an opportunity to leverage the vast knowledge around preventing and reducing violence and to apply an integrated framework for creating safe environments for walking and other forms of physical activity. Violence prevention-oriented strategies for walking include:

- **Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED)** is a set of strategies that can improve a community’s sense of safety through a focus on community design and aesthetics, including the removal of blight, enhanced street lighting, and promotion of art and culture.

- **Safe passages to schools initiatives** that expand Safe Routes to School programs beyond traffic safety with an intentional focus on violence prevention and educational attainment consider gang issues, alcohol density and other safety concerns while working to support walking and encourage students to walk to school.
Prevention Institute strongly supports the implementation of the above mentioned strategies to create healthy, safe and equitable walking environments. We recognize the need to work across sectors, drawing upon the resources and capacities of individuals, organizations, networks and agencies to institute comprehensive solutions. Our organization’s signature tool, the *Spectrum of Prevention*, was designed to harness those resources and create synergy for multi-faceted approaches to achieve health goals across issue areas. We hope the Office of the Surgeon General finds the tool useful as a framework for the forthcoming recommendations on the issue of walkability and walkable communities. In addition to the *Spectrum*, we believe that engaging partners from diverse fields and sectors can bring a breadth and depth of knowledge and skills for advancing meaningful environmental change. Our *Collaboration Multiplier* offers agencies and advocates a tool to bring such partnerships together. By identifying shared strategies, drawing out important differences in resources and areas of expertise as well as by analyzing opportunities for synergy, this tool can offer your efforts a foundation by which to engage new partners and stakeholders.

Prevention Institute commends the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for its attention to the issue of healthy and safe environments that promote walking and look forward to further participating in processes that elicit positive policy, systems and environmental change. Please feel free to contact me should it be helpful to your efforts.

Sincerely,

Larry Cohen, MSW
Executive Director

On behalf of Prevention Institute and the Strategic Alliance for Healthy Food and Activity Environments
Key Prevention Institute Resources and Publications For Consideration

- **Addressing the Intersection: Preventing Violence and Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living**: produced with funding from Kaiser Permanente, describes the links between safety and healthy eating and active living, and provides recommendations for preventing chronic disease in communities heavily impacted by violence. This initiative has been translated into a pilot program in six sites across the country, funded by the Convergence Partnership, to develop approaches to support healthy eating and activity while addressing violence.

- **The Built Environment and Health: 11 Profiles of Neighborhood Transformation**: highlights neighborhood-level changes to the built environment that positively influence the health of community residents, especially in low-income communities.

- **Collaboration Multiplier**: A tool to help organizations from diverse disciplines understand each other’s perspectives and identify strengths and gaps in their partnership to enhance an interdisciplinary approach to community wellness and safety by fostering meaningful and impactful collaboration.

- **Communities Taking Action**: a collection of profiles, showcases successful community initiatives to improve health equity and demonstrates key steps for creating healthy, equitable environments to inspire similar action in other communities and locales. An interactive map allows you to view and browse profiles.

- **The Spectrum of Prevention**: Prevention Institute’s signature tool that helps expand prevention efforts beyond education models by promoting a multifaceted range of activities for effective prevention. The Spectrum identifies multiple levels of intervention and encourages people to move beyond the perception that prevention is about teaching healthy behaviors.