

Healthy Active Vibrant Communities Trailnet, St. Louis, Missouri

OVERVIEW

Trailnet's Healthy, Active, & Vibrant Communities Initiative (HAVC) is a model that uses community engagement and community development principles to empower communities to support and promote healthy eating and active lifestyles. The intent of this intervention is to build communities' capacity to implement policy and environmental changes and build healthy social networks to address obesity. The HAVC Initiative is focused in low-income and at-risk communities, where the need is often greatest. HAVC activities are tailored to complement the unique assets, needs, and interests of each community.

Intended Population: The HAVC Initiative has been implemented in three communities: rural De Soto, suburban Ferguson, and the urban neighborhood Old North St Louis. While the intended beneficiaries of the intervention are community residents, the primary target audience is the key leaders, stakeholders, and others with vested interest or leverage in the HAVC communities. In each community, these individuals are identified and recruited to serve on a local task force. Their efforts, commitment, and community connections are what make the HAVC initiative successful and eventually sustainable.

Setting: Community, with a focus on ethnically and racially diverse, low-to-middle income, suburban, rural, and urban neighborhoods

Background: Trailnet is a non-profit community-based organization that has a twenty-year history of promoting active living in the St Louis area. In addition to the *Healthy, Active & Vibrant Communities* Initiative, Trailnet partners with communities in the St Louis region to develop bicycle and pedestrian master plans, provide education and outreach through initiatives like Safe Routes to Schools, sponsor bike rides and recreational events, and participate in planning, designing and improving the St. Louis regional trail system.

Trailnet developed the HAVC Initiative in response to lessons-learned working throughout the St. Louis region. Previously, Trailnet had focused almost exclusively on creating and connecting a regional trail system and promoting active lifestyles through bicycle rides. Although regional trails are important and highly-used amenities for physical activity, it became clear that more localized, community-scale infrastructure and urban design had the greatest impact on individuals' daily physical activity. In the last fifty years, the St. Louis region, like most of the country, has favored auto-centric regional and community design, resulting in limited opportunities for active living. In addition, a study by the St. Louis University Prevention Research Center documented the disparities in access to healthy foods that exist throughout the St. Louis region. Furthermore, in low-income neighborhoods disparities in access to both physical activity and healthy eating options are greater. The HAVC Initiative aims to reduce obesity rates through community-scale interventions that improve access to healthy foods and opportunities for active living.

In 2006, Trailnet's HAVC Initiative was launched by a two-year grant from the Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH) to work with four at-risk communities to develop the HAVC model to facilitate long-term changes through policy, the built environment, and healthy social networks. Five founding partners collaborated with Trailnet to select communities and develop the HAVC strategy: Grace Hill Settlement House, St. Louis County Department of Health, St. Louis Regional Bicycle Federation, The US Green Building Council St. Louis Chapter, and Whittaker Homes. Although efforts were initiated in the four selected communities, active HAVC programming is being implemented in three of these. They are the City of De Soto (*Get Healthy De Soto*), the City of Ferguson (*Live Well Ferguson!*), and the Old North St. Louis neighborhood of St. Louis City.

Already, HAVC task forces have made positive impacts in their communities. In Fall 2008, De Soto and Ferguson became the first two Missouri municipalities to adopt Complete Streets ordinances. De Soto launched the first farmer's market in Jefferson County in May 2009. During planning for the 14th Street Redevelopment project and the Jackson Park re-design, the Old North HAVC task force recommended bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly accommodations; many of these are being implemented through construction now underway. The successes of such HAVC projects allowed Trailnet to secure a three-year grant to continue the HAVC Initiative through MFH's Model Practice Building grant program.

As a companion to work in their partner communities, Trailnet has published *The Healthy, Active & Vibrant Community Toolkit* to serve as a resource to task force members, regional leadership, and outside groups interested in developing their own local efforts. The Toolkit is a comprehensive guide to implementing solutions based on best practices and lessons-learned from HAVC, and includes recommendations, case studies, mini-articles, and resources.

Additionally, Trailnet receives outside support on the HAVC Initiative from three teams contracted by the Missouri Foundation for Health as a means to further support foundation grantees. The three teams have expertise in implementation, dissemination, and evaluation, respectively. With their assistance, dissemination and evaluation plans are being created.

Length of time in the field: Trailnet HAVC has been in the field since 2007.

IMPLEMENTATION

Trailnet uses community engagement and community development principles to empower communities to change. The HAVC Initiative was designed with the flexibility to meet communities' specific needs. The flexibility of the model means that while Trailnet follows a "recipe" for working with communities, the communities themselves determine the actions they will take. Therefore, the initiative is being implemented differently in each community based on assets, needs and interests. Trailnet serves as a catalyst, bringing together key decision-makers to collectively address obesity with the goal of initiating efforts that will last well beyond Trailnet's involvement. The HAVC intervention addresses the root causes of the obesity epidemic by focusing on changing policy, the built environment, and building healthy social networks.

Main Components: There are three broad components of the initiative – community selection, community capacity building, and technical assistance provided to communities.

1. Community Selection

Community selection is a distinguishing feature of the HAVC intervention. Rather than using a competitive process, Trailnet worked with the founding partner agencies to identify and select communities. The selection preference criteria for HAVC contained four broad categories: diverse community representation, city commitment, community readiness, and strategic overlap with other programs affiliated with Trailnet or similar agencies.

The first step in the selection process was the compilation of demographic data for neighborhoods within St. Louis and municipalities in the metro-St. Louis area. Based on Trailnet's vision for the initiative, selected communities would represent rural, urban, and suburban areas with diverse representation of size, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic factors.

The second step was to identify communities that met the other three HAVC selection criteria. Trailnet and their founding partners identified several candidates that met a combination of demographic, geographic, and other priority criteria. Staff at Trailnet and the partner organizations then identified the assets and liabilities of each community related to healthy eating and physical activity. Assets listed included active supporting agencies, friendly political climate, popular outdoor events, and presence of

bicycle/pedestrian friendly infrastructure. Liabilities listed included limited local organizational capacity, high resident turnover, and safety issues.

In the next step of selection, Trailnet staff met with local leaders and observed community meetings to informally assess readiness. Based on data gathered in all of these steps, Trailnet and the founding partners selected four communities. Trailnet staff then contacted leaders in each community to discuss the initiative and invite the community to participate. The final step was drafting and executing a Memorandum of Understanding between Trailnet and each partner community.

2. Community Capacity Building

Capacity building includes working with communities to organize a local task force, presenting to community leadership, conducting formal community readiness and needs assessments, providing opportunities for professional development, and establishing social networks within communities.

a) Readiness Assessments

In the initial stages of the HAVC Initiative, Trailnet staff teamed up with task force members to conduct Community Readiness Assessments using the methodology from Colorado State University's *Community Readiness: A Handbook for Successful Change*. Data collected in these assessments are used to inform task force strategies and planning.

b) Kick-off Event and Annual Convening

Soon after community selection, Trailnet hosted a kick-off event, affording an opportunity for all key leaders to meet and exchange ideas and information. This event framed the initiative, provided expert speakers to educate leaders on the root causes of the obesity epidemic and promising approaches to addressing it, and created a forum for communication between the partner communities. Trailnet also hosts an annual convening event, where HAVC members have an opportunity to present their successes and lessons-learned from the previous year, network with each other, brainstorm about visions for future projects, and learn about additional best practices from expert presenters.

c) Organizing a Local Task Force

The community task force is fundamental to the HAVC model and is comprised of key stakeholders and individuals who are active and engaged in their community. The process of identifying and recruiting individuals for the HAVC task forces is ongoing and the kick-off and convening events have served as vehicles to identify additional task force members.

In order to sustain task force efforts beyond Trailnet's involvement in the partner communities, Trailnet recommends each community form a standing local committee to carry on the work of the task force.

d) Task Force Identity

Another key component of capacity building is developing the brand and identity of each task force. Trailnet works with each task force to select a name (e.g. *Live Well Ferguson!*), create a logo, and create branded materials when they do not already exist. A recognizable brand builds the capacity of each task force as it gives local visibility and credibility to their efforts.

e) Educational and Professional Development

Capacity building includes linking people in HAVC communities with opportunities for educational or professional development (conferences, seminars, classes, professional networks). For instance, using grant funds from MFH, Trailnet provided financial support for stakeholders in each HAVC community to attend ProWalk-ProBike, a national conference that promotes bicycling and walking.

In addition, the newly published HAVC Toolkit acts as a go-to manual for task force members at all stages of implementing programs. Its purpose is to inject new ideas into the work of the task forces and other communities in a way that is actionable. The Toolkit has been created to serve key decision-makers, such as policy-makers, design professionals, school districts, and elected officials.

3. Technical Assistance and Support

Trailnet staff provides targeted technical assistance to each task force as they work to implement projects and policies. For example, Trailnet provided model policy language and edited draft statements of Complete Streets Policies to help city staff and elected officials in De Soto and Ferguson. In development and infrastructure projects such as Old North St. Louis's 14th Street Redevelopment, Trailnet often provides technical expertise or connects community members with experts to ensure walkability and bikeability best practices are considered.

Trailnet also facilitates projects that may be slowed by technical or bureaucratic hurdles. For example, staff at Trailnet and members of *Get Healthy De Soto* met with key staff from the Jefferson County Health Department to encourage the Health Department to permit farmers' markets in Jefferson County. Together they were able to draft rules and regulations that addressed the Health Department's concerns and allowed for the creation of the De Soto Farmer's Market—the first in Jefferson County, run by *Get Healthy De Soto*.

Keys to Success

- *Partnering organization or committed local partner*
An organization that is established and recognized acts as a conduit to reach community members through HAVC programs. Partnerships with existing groups provide leverage so that time and resources are not spent unnecessarily on building new relationships or community awareness. It is important to have a clear Memorandum of Understanding that outlines roles, responsibilities, and process between the outside organization and the community.
- *Task force work is centered around a focus area or focal point*
Task force work should center around either a focus area or a focal point. A focus area is a place with geographic boundaries that residents identify with such as a municipality, school district, or neighborhood. A focal point can be a school, park, church, or any neighborhood institution or place that residents identify with as a crucial hub of community life. Focus areas and focal points provide a frame of reference for task force work. Focus areas and focal points are also important because they are linked to groups and institutions, and therefore key relationships, that are crucial for sustaining the work of the task force.
- *A community "champion" to keep programs moving forward*
Trailnet required each partner community to identify a committed local point person in the original Memorandum of Understanding. These individuals play a pivotal role by providing leadership, by connecting Trailnet to existing community leaders and organizations, and by sharing responsibilities. They are invested in their towns and advocate for their needs and assets.
- *Ongoing recruitment of invested, active community members and leaders to comprise task force*
Trailnet staff members are always monitoring communities to find newly active or engaged members.
- *Early successes to keep community members engaged*
Following the assessment and planning phases of the project, it is important to identify priority projects that are fairly easy for the task force to accomplish. Focusing on such 'low-hanging fruit' allows the task force to secure some early successes that build task force member confidence and build momentum for the Initiative. One way to gain early success is by dovetailing task force projects with existing projects.

- *Development of an initiative brand in each community*
The initiative brand should include a name, e.g. *Live Well Ferguson!*, and a logo. Additional materials can be created to enforce and promote the local initiative, including t-shirts, brochures, banners, and posters. Development of a brand adds momentum to local efforts, strengthens the identity of the task force, and is an important step towards reaching out to residents at-large.
- *Staff members trained in facilitation of community meetings*
Mobilizing task forces effectively in a relatively short time requires the ability to create goals and agendas for large groups, foster open discussion and exchange of ideas, and steer these conversations toward productive conclusions.

Barriers to Implementation

- *Organizations with lack of resources or poor budget to support projects*
HAVC activities are facilitated by Trailnet, but require support at the local level.
- *Lack of community consensus*
Without agreement among community members that healthy active living is a priority, a HAVC Task Force will struggle to identify goals and action steps - let alone implement these effectively.
- *Local culture reflects lack of interest*
Lack of interest or concern can be measured in the Community Readiness Assessment. Community members must be engaged and reflect a desire to build healthy eating and active living environments.
- *Absence of local governing body with authority to enact change*
When task force work is based on municipal boundaries, the local decision-making body can more readily identify with the task force's scope of work. Therefore, it can be easier for the task force to secure the buy-in of key decision-makers and access government resources required for lasting change.
- *Local politics - government officials or gatekeepers are not supportive*
The progress of HAVC activities -whether they involve events planning, policy adoption, or zoning changes- will be slowed without support of key officials and prominent individuals.

RESOURCES REQUIRED

The primary resource required to implement this initiative is staff time, energy and commitment, and expertise in community organizing, nutrition and physical activity. Trailnet supports a full-time project manager and a percent FTE of several staff that provide administrative support and expertise in nutrition, physical activity, and events coordination. The success of this intervention depends on qualified staff with the necessary skills and background to conduct and manage the various HAVC activities.

Time:

Staff

The Initiative began with funding for a 1.15 FTE with a continuing budget for 2.17 FTE beginning in 2008. The staff currently operates at 2.17 FTE according to the following:

Community Services Development Director: 10%

Active Living Program Manager: 100%

HAVC Coordinator: 82%

HAVC Program Assistant: 12.5%

Task Force Members

Task force members volunteer their personal time. Beyond the 1-2 hours committed to general meetings each month, they easily spend an additional 2-12 hours meeting and working on specific projects.

Primary Funding: The primary funder for HAVC is the Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH). MFH funds cover salaries, benefits, supplies, conferences, travel, printing, the annual convening, and money for a biking or walking event for each partner community.

Supportive Funding: While the HAVC Initiative is funded by MFH, Trailnet staff continues to secure funding to supplement and support HAVC programming. For example, Trailnet was able to secure money from a local foundation to administer a Safe Routes to School program at Clay Elementary School located in the Old North St. Louis task force area. This program will support the HAVC initiative by increasing opportunities for children to walk to school while building social networks among the task force and school staff, students, and parents.

Additionally, HAVC task forces raise money to support additional projects. *Get Healthy De Soto* secured sponsorships to support the De Soto Farmers Market and *Live Well Ferguson!* secured sponsorships for Sunday Parkways.

Other Resources: In addition to sharing expertise with and supporting professional development of others, Trailnet draws on resources in the community including municipal planners, public health educators, academics at local universities, and professionals with a variety of skills in the private and non-profit sectors to enhance its own expertise.

To a lesser degree, resources were invested in continuing education opportunities for key community leaders. This appears to be a particularly successful method of gaining the support of policy makers and municipal leaders. For future HAVC programming, Trailnet would like to increase the funds budgeted for targeted continuing education and professional development of key community leaders and decision-makers.

UNDERLYING THEORY/EVIDENCE

Strategies Used¹

This intervention builds community capacity to implement the following evidence-based strategies:

- **Increase access to healthy foods** through strategic policy and environmental changes and establishing healthy **social networks**
- **Increase access to opportunities for physical activity** through strategic policy and environmental changes and establishing healthy **social networks**

Findings from the Early Assessment²

Site visitors that conducted an early assessment of the HAVC Initiative concluded the following:

- Research from Active Living by Design, the Community Guide, and the Strategic Alliance (ENACT) informed the Initiative.

¹ A full description of the **intervention strategies** used can be found on www.center-trt.org with references to the sources of evidence to support the strategies.

² Trailnet HAVC participated in the Early Assessment of Programs and Policies to Prevent Childhood Obesity project, a collaborative effort of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, CDC Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, CDC Division of Adolescent and School Health, and Macro International. The findings in this section are based on the opinion of the site visitors and derived from the Trailnet HAVC Summary Report (December 2008).

- The logic of the intervention rests on the theory that communities can be more or less supportive of healthy eating and active living. Theoretically, people living in communities with infrastructure to support active living and healthy eating will be healthier because they will have more opportunities to make healthy choices.
- The plausibility of the intervention to produce the desired outcomes is greatest in municipalities (Ferguson and De Soto). This is because municipalities have legal authority and human and financial resources to alter the policy and built environments within their jurisdictional limits. In contrast, neighborhoods must work with their parent municipality to alter the policy and built environment and do not have the authority to do so alone. Despite these limitations, it is still plausible that the intervention will produce the desired outcomes in neighborhoods as well.

POTENTIAL PUBLIC HEALTH IMPACT

The findings from the Early Assessment³ suggest that the intervention has potential for impact in municipalities. However, the potential for success or failure in neighborhoods is still emerging.

Reach: This initiative has the potential to reach all residents of targeted communities and could have similar reach if implemented in other communities that have the organizational infrastructure to support it. The citizens in the communities that are currently engaged in this initiative are economically, racially, and ethnically diverse.

Effectiveness: Financial resources have been allocated in municipalities to fund the construction of infrastructure supporting physical activity. Both municipalities have adopted “Complete Streets” policies. Additionally, barriers to the creation of a farmers market have been reduced in one municipality. Evidence of the effect of these changes on the built environment is emerging.

Adoption: The Trailnet HAVC model has been adopted by two suburban municipalities and one urban neighborhood. It is reasonable to expect that the overall approach could be easily adapted and adopted by additional communities, with specific components tailored to the target community and target population.

Implementation: Communities choose the specific policies, environmental changes, and events to be implemented. This promotes acceptability to community leaders and residents which increases the feasibility of implementation.

Maintenance: Sustainability is dependent on the infrastructure within targeted communities. However, because of the focus on structural change, it is likely that citizens will continue to benefit from improvements in the long-term.

INTERVENTION MATERIALS

The following materials are available for download from www.center-trt.org

Healthy, Active, & Vibrant Community Toolkit

Trailnet’s *Healthy, Active & Vibrant Community Toolkit* is a comprehensive guide for encouraging healthy and active living in local communities. It was created as a resource to task force members, regional leadership, and outside groups interested in developing their own local efforts.

³ Trailnet HAVC participated in the Early Assessment of Programs and Policies to Prevent Childhood Obesity project, a collaborative effort of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, CDC Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, CDC Division of Adolescent and School Health, and Macro International. The findings in this section are based on the opinion of the site visitors and derived from the Trailnet HAVC Summary Report (December 2008).

Community Selection Preference Criteria

The Trailnet HAVC Community Selection Preference Criteria are a list of community characteristics that were used to screen communities for participation in HAVC.

Task Force Preliminary Brainstorm Activity

This survey poses a series of open-ended questions aimed at assessing community resources and gaps related to physical activity and nutrition.

Community Survey

Trailnet's needs assessment tool was completed by members of the task forces and their larger community to better understand community perceptions of the need to increase access to healthier foods and opportunities for physical activity.

Sample of Community Readiness Assessment Results

A sample of compiled results from a community readiness assessment based on "The Community Readiness Model" developed by the Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research at Colorado State University.

Gantt Chart Template

Trailnet often uses Gantt Charts to organize the projects and timelines for each task force.

Trailnet HAVC Logic Model

This logic model provides a snapshot of the underlying logic of Trailnet HAVC as of October 2008.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Community Readiness: A Handbook for Successful Change

Community Readiness is a handbook that lays out methodology for conducting readiness assessments. Trailnet used this resource to create a stakeholder survey that served as a readiness assessment tool for selecting partner communities for the HAVC Initiative.

A pdf of this handbook may be downloaded from the Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research at Colorado State University: <http://www.triethniccenter.colostate.edu/CRhandbook.shtml>

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