

Approach to Supporting Black Communities in Planning and Developing Pedestrian and Active Transportation Infrastructure to Improve the Built Environment

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Abstract

The Live Well Allegheny-Lifting Wellness for African Americans (LWA2) Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) Initiative was created to address racial health disparities in chronic disease, as well as structural determinants and systems of oppression at their root, among the Black community in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania (PA). LWA²-REACH implemented active transportation projects focused on predominantly Black neighborhoods. In doing so, LWA²-REACH enabled—for Allegheny County—a first-of-its-kind connection between two county departments—economic development and the health department—and Black priority communities in the Monongahela River Valley and the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh, PA. During years four and five of the initiative, two miles of road for bicycle use and three miles of road for pedestrian use were improved through traffic calming, safety techniques, and sidewalk replacement. The evolution of the relationships between LWA²-REACH communities and Allegheny County Economic Development generated an iterative, reciprocal awareness of community residents regarding the benefits of active transportation planning processes for their communities, and of municipalities regarding the interest of REACH community residents in engaging in active transportation planning processes. This work is a model for how to apply multi-sector, resident-engaged chronic disease prevention initiatives in predominantly Black communities as part of a comprehensive strategy to increase racial health equity by reducing racial health disparities.

Keywords: Built environment, active transportation, chronic disease, social determinants of health, structural determinants of health, Black community engagement, structural racism

The purpose of this paper is to describe the way in which partners from the Allegheny County, Pennsylvania Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) coalition—the Live Well Allegheny-Lifting Wellness for African American (LWA²) Initiative—implemented active transportation projects. These built environment projects were focused on predominantly Black neighborhoods that were identified at the onset of the LWA²-REACH Initiative (Gary-Webb et al., 2022). The LWA²-REACH coalition brought Allegheny County Economic Development and the Allegheny County Health Department together in the first such initiative between Allegheny County agencies using active transportation grant funding and the provision of technical assistance for Black priority communities in the Monongahela River Valley and the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh to address racial equity in health.

Chronic disease (e.g. diabetes, cardiovascular disease) affects six out of every ten people in the United States and makes up 90% of the nation's \$4.1 trillion in annual health care expenditures (CDC, 2022b, 2023a). Black Americans have a greater risk of poor health outcomes compared with White Americans (Cunningham et al., 2017; Heckler, 1985). For example, Black adults have a higher prevalence of diabetes (16%) and obesity compared to Whites (11%), and Black adults are more than twice as likely to die from diabetes (Hill et al., 2023). Black adults are also more likely than their White counterparts to die of heart disease and some cancers (Hill et al., 2023). Racial disparities in chronic disease outcomes have persisted over time.

The CDC Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) Program

An important strategy to reduce health disparities is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) REACH cooperative grant program, which started in 1999 (CDC, 2023b). The purpose of the REACH program is to achieve health equity through the promotion of healthy behaviors and the reduction of disparities in chronic disease risk factors among specific racial and ethnic groups (CDC, 2022c). Grant recipients choose from a group of predetermined strategy areas through which they carry out their work, e.g. tobacco use cessation, nutrition, community-clinical linkages, and physical activity via active transportation planning. Additionally, REACH grant recipients prioritize the examination of community-level social determinants as well as the structural determinants (e.g. policy, power, and decision making) that impact racial health disparities in chronic disease. Recipients receive a commitment of five years of funding from the CDC.

A cornerstone of the REACH program is prioritizing the participation of recipient Black, Hispanic, Latino, Asian, American Indian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and Alaska Native communities in developing and implementing strategies to address and prevent chronic diseases that affect their residents (CDC, 2022c, 2022d).

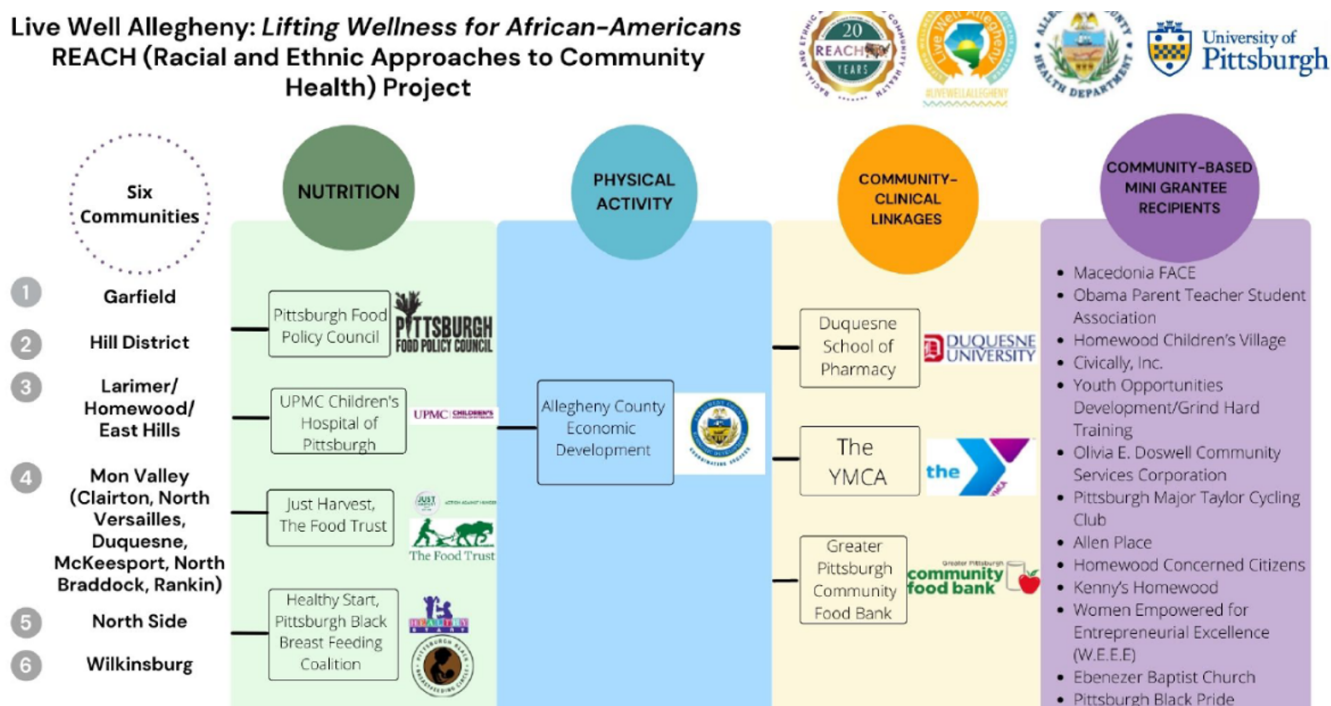
Essential to this work are the partnerships between communities whose members are experts on their public health assets and needs, and culturally humble public health professionals with resources to help communities develop their capacity to prevent and address chronic diseases. Multi-sector partnerships enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of addressing the impacts of social and structural determinants on chronic disease outcomes.

The establishment of REACH by the CDC dovetailed with research calling for public health to reconnect with other sectors with an influence on the impact of place and health (Doreen, 2004; Fullilove, 2013; Massey, 1995; Pastor & Morello-Frosch, 2014; Proulx et al., 2016; Trigg, 2012). Whereas public health professionals, urban planners, and architects of the built environment worked together in the early 20th century to create living spaces that reduced the spread of infectious diseases, the sectors diverged as antibiotics and vaccines allowed other priorities to move to the fore (Dahlberg, 2009). In 2014, Pastor and Morello-Frosch called for revitalization of collaboration between community developers and the public health sector, with an additional directive that “efforts to promote an urban health agenda must directly engage and empower disadvantaged groups to advance broader systems change” (Pastor & Morello-Frosch, 2014). They argued that since people in underserved communities also experienced the greatest burden of poor health outcomes, those communities needed increased political power to co-manage the development of their own communities at a level equal to that of business leaders and political officials (Pastor & Morello-Frosch, 2014). REACH supports community collaboration with organizations and municipal leaders in the prioritizing of built environment changes to address racial health inequities within communities (CDC, 2022d).

The LWA²-REACH Initiative

Persistent racial disparities in chronic disease impelled the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) to implement the LWA²-REACH initiative to specifically address 1) the racial health disparities among the Black community in Allegheny County and 2) structural determinants and systems of oppression at the root of those disparities (Allegheny County Health Department, 2017; Crittenden, 2019; Devaraj et al., 2020; Gary-Webb et al., 2022; Howell et al., 2019). LWA²-REACH chose to implement work in six, urban, priority Black communities using three of the available strategies: nutrition, community-clinical linkages, and physical activity via active transportation planning (Figure 1). Details regarding work on the nutrition and community-clinical linkages strategies were previously published (Elliott et al., 2021; Gary-Webb et al., 2022). To deepen engagement in the REACH communities, the coalition included community-based, mini-grant recipient organizations led by Black community leaders who were implementing projects in one of the three strategies (Figure 1). As noted above, this work will focus on the active transportation strategy.

Figure 1. Overview of the LWA²-REACH Project (Gary-Webb et al., 2022). Reprinted with permission of John Hopkins University Press.



A Novel Partnership for Allegheny County, PA, Founded on Racial Equity Principles

Active transportation is “any self-propelled, human-powered mode of transportation, such as walking or bicycling”(National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, 2022). History shows that planning and decisions around transportation infrastructure have systematically excluded Black communities, leading to inequities in access to transportation (Bors & Moore, 2019; Patterson, 2020). Active transportation is an important consideration in implementing projects that are aimed at reducing racial health inequities given that the built environment is an important determinant of health (Brown et al., 2023). Nationwide, efforts are occurring to improve active transportation in Black residential neighborhoods, and inclusive engagement of Black communities is valuable for moving those efforts forward (Bronx River Alliance, 2023; Go Crenshaw, 2023; Red Bike & Green, 2023; The Major Taylor Cycling Club, 2019).

An important note of context about the nature of policy, systems and environment changes addressed by active transportation strategies is that they are long-term initiatives that take many years to implement. Active transportation projects often involve several stages of planning and then implementation before there are physical changes made to the built environment. Maintaining community focus and support for these projects is necessary to achieve their successful endpoint, as is having the funding to support this work.

Allegheny County Economic Development (ACED) led the LWA²-REACH physical activity strategy, which was designed to establish new activity-friendly routes (e.g. pedestrian, bicycle, public transportation) to everyday destinations. ACED is the county’s lead economic and residential development agency and it is a department within the county government. The agency provides support for land-use planning and development in the county. In this capacity, ACED published *Allegheny Places*, which is the county’s comprehensive plan (Allegheny County, 2008). *Active Allegheny* is the plan for the active transportation component of *Allegheny Places* (Allegheny County Economic Development, 2010).

To facilitate the implementation of community initiatives for built environment changes, LWA²-REACH implemented the Active Allegheny Grant Program (AAGP) in REACH communities (Allegheny County Economic Development, 2010; CDC, 2019). The purpose of the Active Allegheny Grant Program is to provide financial assistance to municipalities and councils of governments to develop community plans and design transportation projects that will, when implemented, provide bicycle and pedestrian connections to important local destinations and transportation systems, and increase residents’ opportunities for physical activity.

This work aligns with the stated objective in the 2023-2027 iteration of the Plan for a Healthier Allegheny, which is Allegheny County’s Community Health Improvement Plan, to “Add at least 50 miles of accessible trails for recreational use by 2027, with at least 15 miles in

environmental justice communities” (Allegheny County Health Department, 2017).

An additional feature of this partnership was that it was informed by and evolved through resources gained from a racial-equity training and anti-racism experience facilitated by Yoga Roots on Location (yogarootsonlocation.com) held in January of 2020. “The intended outcome [of the training] was to develop an action plan for responding to structural and institutional racism for members of the LWA²-REACH coalition while using a holistic approach to enable community members to attain a sustainable model of accountability as they carry out community-driven work throughout Allegheny County” (Mendez et al., 2022). Further details of the training and the evaluation of its impact were previously published (Mendez et al., 2022).

A Brief History of Two LWA²-REACH Communities

A historical understanding of racial inequities in REACH communities is critical to understanding the importance of helping Black communities build political power to co-manage the development of their own communities at a level equal to that of municipal leaders and political officials. Homewood and The Monongahela Valley are two of six Allegheny County communities that were the focus of the physical activity strategy of LWA²-REACH.

Homewood

Homewood consists of three distinct areas – Homewood North, Homewood West, and Homewood South. A part of the City of Pittsburgh since 1834, Homewood once offered a respite from some of the smokier areas of the county during the region’s industrial boom (HELP Initiative-Pittsburgh, 2023). Since the City of Pittsburgh has many hills and valleys, the relative flatness of the area made it highly prized as a hub in the city’s streetcar system (Weber et al., 1981; Wideman, 1985). Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Homewood was a diverse middle-class community (Weber et al., 1981). In the 1940s one-fifth of the residents of Homewood owned their own homes and the community was stable with only 2% of residents migrating out of the community. In the second half of the century however, the consequences of historical institutional racism led to white-flight and disinvestment (HELP Initiative-Pittsburgh, 2023; Weber et al., 1981). From 1950-1960 there was a major in-migration of Black residents who were displaced from another Black community in Pittsburgh that was decimated by urban revitalization. The White population in Homewood fell by 66% (Weber et al., 1981). Since the turn of the 21st century, momentum has been building steadily as residents, in collaboration with local non-profits and local government leaders, have worked hard to bring new investment into Homewood.

Today, 94.4% of Homewood’s 6,062 residents are Black (WPRDC, 2021). Sixty percent of its small population is heavily reliant on public transportation and walking to get to everyday destinations and work, and more

than 40% of households in Homewood South and West do not own a car (*Homewood Mobility Plan*, 2022). The City of Pittsburgh and its partners, from the community and transportation agencies, completed a neighborhood mobility plan in 2021. The plan’s data collection found that in Homewood: 1) more than 13% of its sidewalks are in poor or very poor condition, 2) 11% of transit stops have poor or very poor sidewalk condition, 3) Homewood has a higher pedestrian crash rate (crashes/1000 people) than the City of Pittsburgh, and 4) 75% of vehicles travel over the speed limit on its primary travel corridors (City of Pittsburgh, 2020; *Homewood Mobility Plan*, 2022).

The Monongahela Valley

The City of McKeesport, and the Turtle Creek Valley—which encompasses the REACH priority communities of Braddock and Rankin—are part of the Monongahela River Valley (known locally as the Mon Valley). McKeesport was a major steel hub which produced metal tubes and pipes until its steel mills closed in 1980 (Lease, c1992). McKeesport experienced a large population loss, from 55,355 in 1940 to 17,727 today (Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, 2019). As of 2020, 39.1% of McKeesport, PA residents identify as Black (Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, 2019). Braddock and Rankin are near the US Steel Edgar Thompson Works, which still produces steel. By the 1980s, the steel industry in the region collapsed. Together, Braddock and Rankin had 25,796 residents in 1940 and have 3,617 residents today, 75.9% of whom identify as Black (Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, 2019).

When the steel industry began to collapse, White, skilled workers who had benefited from the post-World War II GI Bill and who were given the most lucrative, safe jobs at the mills fled the Mon Valley to find work elsewhere (Mon Valley Initiative, 2020). Black workers who had been denied union membership and had been given lower-paid, more dangerous jobs, were less able to find work, and many Black families had fewer resources to leave the Mon Valley (Mon Valley Initiative, 2020). As the population waned, attention to the infrastructure of the area also declined. Many Black residents displaced from public housing demolition and renovation in the City of Pittsburgh moved to the Mon Valley to use Section 8 vouchers, and further gentrification in the city in the 2000s led many more lower-income families, including Black families, to seek affordable housing in the Mon Valley (Courier Classifies, 2015; Petras, 2019; Thomas, 2008).

Today, 30.4% of households in McKeesport, PA have no vehicle and 8.4% walk, bike or take public transit to work; while 31.6% of households in Braddock and Rankin combined have no vehicle and 13.7% walk, bike, or take public transit to work (Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, 2019). Additionally, 32.7% of residents in McKeesport, PA and 34.5% of residents in Braddock and Rankin combined live below the poverty line (compared with 11.1% in Allegheny County) (Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, 2019). Since the late 1980s, local non-profits have concentrated efforts on helping

residents of the Mon Valley find work and have strategized ways to bring investment back to the region. Many of the strategies have focused on ways to capitalize on the Mon Valley’s natural resources via trails and riverfront development.

Methods

LWA²-REACH Active Transportation Projects in Homewood and the Monongahela Valley

During Years 1-4 of the LWA²-REACH Program, the Active Allegheny Grant Program supplemented by other active transportation grant dollars—funded projects that address major risk factors that contribute to chronic disease in Allegheny County by providing resources related to active transportation. This was specifically for the design and integration of active, safe, walkable, and bikeable spaces in the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh and the Monongahela Valley, which encompasses the Boroughs of Braddock, Rankin, and the City of McKeesport. The projects implemented in these three priority Black communities are described in Table 1.

LWA ² -REACH Priority Community	Title of Project (Starting Year)	Funding Amount	Project Description
Homewood neighborhood	Homewood Mobility Plan (2018)	\$162,000 for planning and design; More than \$1 million committed by City of Pittsburgh for improvement construction.*	The Homewood neighborhood was selected as an Active Allegheny Grant Program grantee following the completion of its comprehensive community plan in 2018. Mobility improvements included speed humps, high visibility crosswalks, ADA ramps, and sidewalk replacements for 10 miles along two heavily used corridors (<i>Homewood Mobility Plan, 2022</i>).
City of McKeesport	Walk, Bike, Ride McKeesport Mobility Plan (2022)	\$241,000 for planning and design.*	In 2020, the City of McKeesport sought assistance through the Active Allegheny Grant Program to improve access to its many amenities, connections to schools, social services, and grocery stores among others. The mobility plan was adopted in November 2022, and it contains approximately six miles of infrastructure improvements, such as crosswalk visibility enhancements, streetscape lighting, bicycle pavement markings, speed humps, and sidewalk replacements (<i>Walk, Bike, Ride McKeesport: Mobility Plan, 2022</i>).
Turtle Creek Valley includes the communities of Rankin †, Braddock †, North Braddock †, East Pittsburgh, Turtle Creek, Wilmerding, Monroeville, Pitcairn, and Trafford, PA	Turtle Creek Connector Trail (2022)	\$200,000 for feasibility study and \$2.5 million for design.	REACH partners completed a feasibility study for the Turtle Creek Connector Trail project. The proposed trail connector’s goal is to provide an accessible, convenient, and equitable system linkage between two regional trail systems, thereby improving the connectivity of existing transportation assets. In 2022, Allegheny County committed funds from its Trail Development Fund to complete engineering and design on the entire corridor (<i>Turtle Creek Connector Trail Feasibility Study, 2022</i>).
*Active Allegheny Grant Program †REACH priority community			

Evolution of Community Resident and Partner Engagement

With the canceling of in-person meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic—which began during year two of the five-year grant—municipal active transportation planners organized virtual focus groups and virtual public meetings where the turnout for participation was sometimes quite low. ACED and municipal partners presumed that the low community turnout was due to the pandemic. Once pandemic restrictions began to lighten, ACED returned to its traditional plan of holding public meetings at set times and places, and quickly learned that the “old way” of doing outreach did not work well before the pandemic and it did not work well afterward. The tools discussed during the

anti-racism training helped ACED to create a community-engaged plan that placed their staff at existing community events and meetings where community members were certain to be present (Mendez et al., 2022).

In year four of the REACH cooperative grant, ACED found better avenues for in-person engagement and project planning and found that the most impactful interactions were those where they took projects to existing community groups, events, and meetings. LWA²-REACH funding made these increased efforts to engage with the community possible. Connecting with priority communities in this way increased the level and quality of engagement with individuals and helped ACED build the capacity of priority community leaders to apply for active transportation

planning and development grants. ACED, in partnership with grant recipients, implemented public engagement work plans around a larger number of community events, versus the “old way”—one or two formal public meetings during a project. Conducting community engagement in this way requires more work and organization, but the benefits demonstrate a greater return on the investment of additional time and resources.

Methods used included public meetings, project advertisements, in person and virtual meetings, online surveys, project web sites and stakeholder interviews. As a result, more residents are engaged, and the plans have drawn further funding for active transportation initiatives to REACH communities.

Results

The evolution of the relationships between LWA²-REACH communities and the ACED generated an iterative, reciprocal awareness of community residents regarding the benefits of active transportation planning processes for their communities, and of municipalities regarding the interest of REACH community residents in engaging in active transportation planning processes.

In the Homewood neighborhood of the City of Pittsburgh, the development of the Homewood Mobility Plan raised residents’ awareness of what was possible for their community’s active transportation infrastructure, since the plan was community-informed from the beginning. The design was created with residents’ stated needs as the focus, and community residents were able to note priority areas where construction should be focused first. As neighborhood leaders and residents engaged in moving from planning and design to implementation, the City of Pittsburgh set aside \$1,097,000 in its budget to construct elements of the Homewood Mobility Plan.

The Homewood Mobility Plan used a variety of approaches to engage community residents in 2021, as outlined in Table 2. Residents were engaged at 13 separate meetings, six of which were existing community meetings which municipal planners attended to meet residents at times and places that were convenient. Outreach expanded through a community survey, as well as postcards strategically placed at activity hubs like the local library. In addition to these outreach strategies, the Homewood Mobility Plan partnered with 28 local organizations to ensure the relevance of project activities (*Homewood Mobility Plan*, 2022). Meetings were virtual amidst the evolving COVID-19 pandemic.

During years four and five of the REACH-LWA² grant, two miles of road for bicycle use and three miles of road for pedestrian use were improved through traffic calming, safety techniques, and sidewalk replacement. The Homewood Mobility Plan will continue to advance over the next several years, and planners emphasized that partnerships with local organizations, schools, and religious institutions will continue to be critical to the success of the project (*Homewood Mobility Plan*, 2022).

Table 2 also describes community engagement activities carried out for the Walk, Bike, Ride McKeesport Mobility Plan. “The outreach process was broken into three stages—listen, collaborate, and refine—that aimed to build a common understanding of existing conditions and recommendations that started with listening, were strengthened by partnerships, and fine-tuned with feedback” (*Walk, Bike, Ride McKeesport: Mobility Plan*, 2022). Because the CDC REACH grant enabled ACED to focus active transportation planning funding in communities selected by LWA²-REACH, ACED partners met and communicated with City of McKeesport municipal leaders for the first time in their professional tenure during the latter part of the five-year grant. In Year 5, in addition to counting the number of residents engaged, ACED recorded that 69 Black resident voices were included among the 153 residents reached in the feedback process (Ogourec, 2023). This type of demographically detailed data collection was also new to ACED. The project is now in the design phase.

Community engagement activities for the Turtle Creek Connector Trail Feasibility Study are also described in Table 2. Three community meetings, including two public open houses, were organized to engage residents in the project plan. After the completion of the feasibility study, Allegheny County created the Trail Development Fund (TDF) to advance important trail and active transportation initiatives in the county. The TDF, funded by the American Rescue Plan Act and administered by ACED, awarded nearly \$26 million to 18 projects. The trail work being done in the Mon Valley garnered the attention of Allegheny County funding decision makers who awarded \$2.5 million to the Turtle Creek Connector project to move it from the planning stage to the design stage.

As of Year 5, the Turtle Creek Connector Trail is in design. ACED has engaged with each municipality on which trail layout is best.

Method	REACH Priority Community Plan	Activities
Public Meetings (virtual and in person) In-person meetings included community events,	Homewood Mobility Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four meetings (2021) a neighborhood safety audit, a focus group, and two virtual, public meetings. • Six general neighborhood meetings, held as agenda items of other community organizations’ meetings.

public open-houses and pop-up engagements	Walk, Bike, Ride McKeesport Mobility Plan	<p>Municipal planners set up booths at events from 2021-2022 including Good Neighbor Day, Community Day, and also held public meetings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Year 3 (2021) 25 people were engaged via online and in-person events. • In Year 4 (2022) 246 people were engaged via online and in-person events. • In Year 5 (2023), through the summer, 153 residents were engaged at five local events
	Turtle Creek Connector Trail Feasibility Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • June 23, 2021: Originally slated to be an in-person meeting with 132 registrants, the meeting was moved online due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions and was attended by 67 participants. • Two in-person public open houses were held in July 2021. The events were attended by 68 participants, with 19 residents representing the REACH priority communities. • Comments by meeting participants were recorded for the report.
In-person and Virtual Project Advertisements	Homewood Mobility Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings and activism promoted on neighborhood and municipal official social media pages • Neighborhood postcard mailers to 1,100 addresses along the major corridors of the neighborhood • Physical distribution of 500 postcards to community groups, neighborhood destinations, and at events • Postcard distribution at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh-Homewood • Paid advertisement in the Homewood Community Health & Wellness Summit program
Online Community Survey	Homewood Mobility Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An online survey was used to gather input. Respondents received \$150 gift card incentives.
	Walk, Bike, Ride McKeesport Mobility Plan	<p>Two surveys were conducted in 2021.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first was distributed at community events, by local vendors and business owners, through social media, and within community organizations. At least 58 people participated. • The second was a survey directed distributed to 6th-8th graders at a local middle school, which garnered 240 responses.
Project website	Homewood Mobility Plan	<p>“A project website for the Homewood Mobility Plan was housed on the Engage PGH site, the City of Pittsburgh’s online platform for community engagement. The Engage PGH page...provided general information including the project purpose, timeline, goals, and contact information.” The site was set up to receive community feedback through surveys and resident comments. Resident feedback helped the Homewood Mobility Plan to map the areas that residents identified as those in need of improvements.</p>
	Turtle Creek Connector Trail Feasibility Study	<p>“In March 2021, the project team published a webpage on the Allegheny County Department of Public Works website. This platform was used to begin getting the word out about the planning process to study the feasibility of a trail system in the Turtle Creek Valley. The purpose was to inform the community of the goal to study possible connections between the Westmoreland Heritage Trail in Trafford Borough and the Great Allegheny Passage trail system across the Monongahela River from Rankin Borough. The project’s Purpose and Need report was published on the website for public review and provided a way for interested parties to stay informed about the project by providing basic contact information. Twenty individuals provided contact information to obtain project updates.”</p>
	Walk, Bike, Ride McKeesport	Seven organizations were asked for input:

<p>Stakeholder Interviews and Meetings with Public Officials</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allegheny County Economic Development • Allegheny County Health Department • Pittsburgh Regional Transit • City of McKeesport • Youth Places • Action Housing • Heritage Community Initiatives <p>The stakeholders conveyed the heavy reliance of McKeesport residents on public transportation and needs for improved connections to public transit stops and safe connections to green spaces like parks and active transportation routes.</p>	
	<p>Turtle Creek Connector Trail Feasibility Study</p>	<p>“The initial connection with the officials was with a meeting at the Turtle Creek Valley Council of Governments (TCVCOG). This meeting set the expectations for the project and timeline. Following the meeting with the TCVCOG, project team members met with the municipal officials individually for each community to gather local knowledge about the corridor through their communities. Some of these meetings were held at the municipal building prior to the pandemic and some were held virtually to adhere to pandemic mitigations. Throughout the study the project team remained in contact with the municipal officials through emails, phone, and virtual meetings. The project team continued to review and gather feedback on the alignments from municipal officials prior to being presented to the public.”</p>
<p>Sources: (<i>Homewood Mobility Plan, 2022; Turtle Creek Connector Trail Feasibility Study, 2022; Walk, Bike, Ride McKeesport: Mobility Plan, 2022</i>)</p>		

Discussion

The approach and key metrics for the REACH cooperative grant were outlined by the CDC, and each of the grantee organizations involved in LWA²-REACH had their own community engagement strategies. As described by the work of Mendez, et al (2022), LWA²-REACH implemented additional racial equity training and assessment for partner organizations which catalyzed ACED to adopt a new approach to the work which elevated and integrated Black residents’ voices, lived experiences, and community-historical context. Given that active transportation work takes many years to fund, design, and build, we cannot yet claim that political power was built by priority community residents; but this work represents essential steps toward priority community residents realizing and building political power in partnership with a municipal organization that is prepared to partner with them to use that power to codevelop the infrastructure that shapes their local environment.

The active transportation strategy of the LWA²-REACH coalition illustrates the importance of supporting Black communities in planning and developing pedestrian and active transportation infrastructure to improve the built environment. Our results are further evidence of the importance of multi-sector partnerships between urban planning and public health (Corburn, 2017; Pastor & Morello-Frosch, 2014). Professionals in both fields need to better understand and communicate about their work to achieve a deeper connection with communities that have the potential to bring about equitable access to active transportation infrastructure. We describe challenges and limitations to our local initiatives and offer three primary

lessons learned to people who are implementing similar programs.

Challenges and Limitations to Active Transportation Project Development and Implementation

There are challenges and limitations that impact the planning and development of active transportation infrastructure by REACH coalition partners and our priority communities. First, Allegheny County has 130 municipalities-each with its own council and manager. Some municipalities in REACH communities are one to two square miles, with limited staff capacity. Typically, these municipalities have one manager who is responsible for addressing all the community’s concerns including day-to-day operations. This makes it a challenge to dedicate focused effort towards advancing large, time-intensive active transportation projects.

Limited staff capacity is compounded in Black communities by the institutional disinvestment that is a result of white flight and deindustrialization that was previously described. In these communities there is often more to do to implement built environment projects because of disrepair that becomes blight. The conditions of the physical environment are in worse shape than in many predominantly White communities in Allegheny County.

Second, as mentioned previously, the project period was from 2018-2023, which spanned the COVID pandemic. This presented several challenges for public-facing projects including the difficulty of in-person gathering. It was also during this time that we saw the impact of competing priorities in the smaller municipalities

with leadership that was stretched thin by responding to the pandemic and meeting the immediate needs of residents.

Third, staff turnover and bureaucracy were an issue for LWA²-REACH partners, including ACED. During the time of implementation, ACED hired and lost two project managers who were involved in implementing these projects. Turnover is also an issue within the municipalities and requires reorientation of new municipal staff each time this occurs.

Lessons Learned

Three key lessons learned throughout this effort generally apply to others intending to undertake active transportation projects in communities that face disparities in health exacerbated by inequities in social and structural determinants.

Acknowledge and understand social, economic, and environmental context.

There are many social, economic, and environmental factors in urban communities with high rates of poverty that can take priority over implementing active transportation initiatives. It is important to take this context into account when considering implementing projects (Corburn, 2017; Minkler et al., 2008; Pastor & Morello-Frosch, 2014). In McKeesport and Turtle Creek, for example, there is a lot of blight and abandonment that are caused by major population loss due to deindustrialization. Homewood is still reeling from the impacts of redlining that led to disinvestment in the community and decline in the built environment. Understanding and acknowledging the nature of these relationships to the built environment is important when working in these communities.

When a community has many competing priorities and limited capacity it can take more time and effort to implement an active transportation initiative. As was discussed earlier, people living in underserved communities experience socioeconomic disadvantage and, therefore, require additional political power to seek assistance in community development efforts (Pastor and Morello-Frosch, 2014). The LWA²-REACH coalition sought to limit these challenges by dedicating specific resources to these communities for the specific purpose of impacting the built environment. This guaranteed that ACED would find a way to work in REACH communities despite the challenges that each municipality faces.

The fields of public health and community development are focused on systems change. The work of addressing the social and structural determinants of health is about going upstream to address systems change (Pastor & Morello-Frosch, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2003; Yearby, 2020). Consequently, the CDC is increasingly emphasizing the implementation of policy, systems, and environment changes (PSE) in their funding programs including REACH. This is evident in the physical activity strategy that requires PSE changes as the primary funded initiatives. This is a much longer-term strategy that requires greater

understanding of these conditions in local communities in which funding is being used.

Operate with adaptable community engagement strategies.

Understanding the importance of the social context leads to the next recommendation, which is to use flexibility in implementing community engagement strategies. When implementing projects like this, we learned that we need to have flexibility in community engagement strategies to ensure that residents are well represented in the planning process.

One of the challenges that we experienced was that traditional planning strategies for holding public meetings were not successful at attracting attention from residents. ACED pivoted to virtual opportunities for participation, which was especially important given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They also attended local events to reach community members and leveraged other REACH coalition partnerships to conduct outreach. Multi-sector collaboration was important to informing this strategy and encouraging ACED to rethink traditional outreach methods.

Act with intentionality.

To meet the long-term outcomes of this project, the LWA²-REACH Coalition acted with intentionality to implement strategies that are specifically suited to the priority communities while also centering the needs and priorities of these Black communities. This included providing specific outreach and technical support to the communities before and during implementation of projects and sharing detailed summaries of project activities with the community to maintain accountability.

The purpose of the Active Allegheny Grant Program is to give specific resources to municipalities and to put them in the driver's seat for the implementation of active transportation projects. To meet the requirements of this grant program, the local municipality is required to be the applicant. This is often a challenge for small municipalities or municipalities that have a lot of competing priorities. Challenges include staff capacity to write grant applications, manage the implementation and complete required reporting. Staff at ACED conducted specific outreach to priority communities to solicit applications. This program was only competitive within REACH communities in Allegheny County, not all 130 municipalities in the county. ACED also provided technical capacity by helping municipalities implement the project. Examples included assistance in managing consultants, conducting outreach, and completing reporting to the CDC.

The LWA²-REACH Coalition intentionally centered race as part of the implementation of these projects because the overall goal of the REACH program is to address racial health disparities. This included conducting anti-racism training for the entire coalition, including ACED, and participating in a racial equity assessment of our work to better understand whether and how partner organizations were tailoring their work to African American communities

(Mendez et al., 2022). Although community engagement in the design phase is complete, as the projects in the three communities are built, focused outreach to Black residents will need to be a focus of marketing strategies to ensure that Black residents benefit from using the new active transportation infrastructure.

Summary and Conclusion




The LWA²-REACH Coalition in Allegheny County provides a local case study of implementation of national initiatives that are aimed at increasing physical activity to reduce chronic disease rates. This is a model for how to apply initiatives such as Active People, Healthy Nation in predominantly Black communities as part of a comprehensive strategy to increase racial health equity by reducing racial health disparities (CDC, 2022a). In Homewood and The Monongahela Valley in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania the multi-sector coalition adapted its methods of community engagement to increase participation by residents in the planning for active transportation in their communities. This resulted in clear recommendations that are being implemented.

By sharing information about our work, we hope to 1) encourage more community resident involvement and better relationships with local government and leaders, and 2) generate ideas for residents to share equal influence in decision-making for their communities in the development of active transportation infrastructure through strong partnerships with municipal leaders in public health and urban planning, while centering race as part of implementation.

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Conflicts of interest statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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