

WellSpring

Active Edmonton: Lessons Learned

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More and more municipal and provincial active living initiatives are taking off. Their goal: to get their citizens more active by promoting physical activity to them. Examples include Saskatoon's in motion, Ottawa's ACTIVE2010, Calgary's GO2 and Active Edmonton. The hope is that these initiatives make a difference, and many would argue that they are (Bauman, 2004).

Active Edmonton started five years ago, and originally it was supposed to end after five years in 2008. But the City of Edmonton is strongly considering making Active Edmonton a permanent part of its offerings to Edmontonians.

As Active Edmonton reaches a turning point, it's important to reflect on successes and challenges. This WellSpring looks back at Active Edmonton's first five years and shares the lessons learned from that period.

What's in This Article for You?

- How Active Edmonton Got Started
- Successes
- Challenges
- Lessons for Physical Activity Promotion Initiatives



Brenda Wong and Dot Laing, the City of Edmonton recreation professionals who managed Active Edmonton during that time, provided much of the information that follows (D. Laing, personal interview, July 2, 2008; B. Wong, personal interview, July 7, 2008).

How Active Edmonton Got Started

Over five years ago, 30 community leaders met with Bill Smith, mayor of Edmonton at the time, to discuss the creation of a city-wide physical activity promotion program.

The community leaders who became Active Edmonton partners ranged from local, provincial and federal government to health care organizations to not-for-profit and community groups and even corporate groups.

To prepare for the initiative, the partners and City of Edmonton staff met with Russ Kisby, former president of ParticipACTION, and Linda Martin of the Saskatoon



Health Region. Kisby and Martin presented on in motion, the successful physical activity promotion model first used in Saskatoon and then adopted by a number of other municipalities and the provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

The in motion model, as with other successful models, does the following:

- Targets communities
- Builds partnerships within communities
- Develops and implements physical activity health promotion programs
- Creates community awareness of the health benefits of physical activity
- Develops specific promotion strategies for each target audience/group
- Supports each strategy with research, communication and marketing activities, and ongoing evaluation

Active Edmonton used a similar model designed specifically for Edmonton. And it was decided that Active Edmonton would be a five-year initiative encouraging all Edmontonians to value physical activity and make it part of their daily lives.

Successes

Political Support

The mayor's championing of the initiative was a key success factor. Having the political leader of the city invite partners to the table helped to create buy-in and a unified front for Active Edmonton.

Effective Branding

Strong brand recognition is important in any social marketing campaign (Grier & Bryant, 2005). Active Edmonton created a successful brand that spoke to Edmontonians. The image of an empty couch became well-known throughout the city as a symbol of being active. The



couch was in local newspapers, on billboards and in TV commercials, tied with messages that encouraged Edmontonians to get up, get out and get active.

Corporate Partners and Sponsorship

Brenda Wong encourages similar initiatives to welcome corporate partners and sponsorship. It was partnerships such as these that allowed Active Edmonton to have great media support in its first five years.

The Edmonton Sun helped to produce the Active Edmonton Guide, which landed on the doorsteps of over 280,000 households twice a year. Citytv's Breakfast Television featured regular spotlights on Active Edmonton in which fitness educator Marjorie O'Connor spoke to Edmontonians about being active.

Focus Years

Active Edmonton targeted several groups, but rather than tackle them all at once, the initiative focused on one group a year.

"The focus years were very useful and allowed us to develop specific strategies each year," says Brenda Wong.

Focus years also helped to form important new partnerships in the community. For example, the 2004 focus on children and youth connected the City of Edmonton with Edmonton schools, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Edmonton and the YMCA. One advantage of this was that Active Edmonton was able to turn to experts in children and youth for advice on how to reach this group.

Challenges

Securing Resources

As with many community initiatives, a major challenge was securing resources: people, time and money.

The hunt for funding can eat up precious time. And often the time needed for this is forgotten about in the planning stages. However, lack

of funding can have a plus too. “It encouraged us to get creative and... seek partners and sponsorships in the corporate world,” says Brenda Wong.

Partners with Different Viewpoints

Partnerships are key to the success of community initiatives, but they come with their own challenges.

Active Edmonton coordinators often struggled to balance the wishes of key partners. For example, some partners wished to focus on changing policy, while others wished to focus directly on the general public. Dot Laing says, “Often everyone has the same goal: get people active. But the processes and steps they want to take are different. For some, letting go of their way can be difficult.”

Facilitating and maintaining the support of partners with different viewpoints is a challenge that requires work and patience.

Staff Changes

Staff changes are a challenge in any organization, and Active Edmonton was no exception.

It takes time to bring new employees up to speed. And momentum, connections and resources may leave with a departing employee. However, new employees bring fresh ideas and enthusiasm, which can be great.

Maintaining Enthusiasm

Maintaining enthusiasm was another challenge for Active Edmonton.

This may have been due to the length of the initiative. However, other factors, such as a change in leadership, may have played a role. When Bill Smith was no longer mayor, there was a decided decrease in energy. That change did, however, bring other players to the table such as the Alberta Centre for Active Living and Alberta’s Be Fit for Life Network, which was a positive outcome.



Lessons for Physical Activity Promotion Initiatives

Here is a summary of the lessons learned from Active Edmonton’s first five years:

- Ground your initiative in research, evidence and proven promotion models (e.g. in motion).
- Partnerships are key. Take time in the beginning to build strong partnerships, and maintain them well. It can be hard to establish new partners in the middle of an initiative.
- From the very start, build the time you need to search for grants and funds into your work plan, along with the possibility that funders may drop out.
- Political connections are helpful, but politicians come and go. This can affect your initiative long-term. Think of sustainability right from the start.
- Create a brand that speaks to the community. Edmontonians seemed to like the empty couch as a symbol for getting active.
- Make sure your messages are consistent with other physical activity promotion initiatives. Conflicting advice about physical activity can confuse audiences.
- Approach the corporate sector for support, partnerships and sponsorships. For example, running and cycling stores are keen to get more folks active.
- Focus on one audience/group at a time. Don’t do it all at once, even when it’s tempting to do so.
- Develop strategies that you can carry out with the resources you have. Be careful not to exhaust your resources (people, time and money).

Mission Statement of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of all people through physical activity.

- Let community experts and leaders take charge of strategies. Their expertise will make programs and strategies more effective. They will also help the community to take ownership of programs and strategies and make them sustainable.
- Learn to negotiate with your partners so you can all find common ground.
- Prepare for staff turnover with cross-training, teamwork and documentation of procedures and other work activities.
- Keep networking. Smile, shake lots of hands and remember those names.
- Evaluate your strategies. What's working? What isn't? How can you improve things next time?



Active Edmonton, as it was, is no more. Where it will go from here and what shape it will take we will have to wait and see. But as Active Edmonton winds up its first five years, it will continue to be one of the voices encouraging people to be active and to make healthy choices.

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IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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