Community Walking Project: Challenges, Lessons and Successes

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In January 2010, the Alberta Centre for Active Living received funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada to carry out a pilot project titled the Community Walking Project (CWP). The purpose of this article is to provide background information about the project and to outline some of the project’s challenges and successes, and lessons learned.

The aim of the CWP is to promote walking as an accessible and easy way for people to be more physically active and improve their health. In particular, the CWP focuses on diabetes prevention and management, through walking.

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The Benefits of Walking

Walking is an easy, accessible form of aerobic physical activity, which most people can do comfortably. It is a low-skill activity that requires little or no equipment (except for suitable footwear) and minimal instruction.

Walking regularly can be an important part of preventing and managing many different medical conditions or chronic diseases, including type 2 diabetes.

From a community perspective, walking provides a number of commonly recognized benefits, such as:

- being a great opportunity to socialize with neighbours and friends;
- helping to create a safer, more friendly and connected community;
- helping to reduce isolation and loneliness experienced by some people in the community; and
• encouraging pedestrian traffic, which helps to enliven the community when people walk to local shops, parks, restaurants and other services or facilities.

**Why the Focus on Diabetes?**

In Canada more than 9 million Canadians have diabetes or pre-diabetes (Canadian Diabetes Association). The majority with diabetes (90%) have type 2 diabetes.

By 2020, it is estimated that diabetes will cost the Canadian health care system $16.9 billion a year (Canadian Diabetes Association).

Regular physical activity can play a key role in the prevention and management of type 2 diabetes.

**CWP’s Early Focus on Central Edmonton**

Diabetes rates are known to be quite high in more vulnerable populations. For instance, it is reported to have a higher prevalence in different cultural communities, such as Aboriginal communities, and in neighbourhoods or areas with a low socioeconomic status overall.

Initially, the goal of the CWP was to reach neighborhoods and communities in central Edmonton. Many of these communities are considered “stressed” due to high crime rates, and low socioeconomic status.

Many of these communities are considered walkable, as they have a grid system layout and many services are within walking distance.

Given the health benefits provided by regular walking, the project was seen as a proactive means to promote physical activity to those who may have limited financial or other resources to participate in or discover physical activity opportunities available to them.

A “side benefit” of establishing walking groups in these neighborhoods was that the groups could be helpful in establishing a stronger community network, which could help address other socio-economic issues in the area, such as reducing crime activity through the presence of more people being active in the community.

**Progress in 2010**

From April to November 2010, the project went through three main phases:

• exploratory;
• realignment; and
• refinement.

Each phase had its own challenges, successes and lessons learned.

**Exploratory Phase: “Determine where is the interest?”**

The CWP’s exploratory phase involved a significant amount of time discovering the “lay of the land” and determining the level of interest in participating in or supporting the project.

Project Coordinator, Dianne Gillespie, spent a lot of time talking to individuals, groups, local businesses, government agencies and relevant organizations, giving frequent presentations about the project.

Early goals included:

• learning which organizations and community groups exist in central Edmonton;
• understanding the core services and programs of different groups and organizations, and which populations they serve;
• determining how each group or organization might be able to help the CWP, whether by getting the word out to potential walking group participants, or by offering other project support; and
• generally assessing the capacity of each organization to become involved with or support the CWP.

Gillespie also attended many community events, hoping to actually engage residents of central Edmonton. Examples of such events included the
McDougall Community Fair, the Queen Mary Community’s Garden Opening, an Africa Centre fitness class, and diabetes education classes offered in central Edmonton by Alberta Health Services.

Gillespie suggests that by going through these exploratory steps, it “helps you to streamline the work you are planning, so you can become more targeted.”

Exploratory Phase Challenges and Successes:
- A major challenge was the targeted population of this project. In many cases, these populations were facing a number of barriers, such as low income, speaking English as a second language, safety issues and family obligations. When facing so many barriers, incorporating behavior change, such as walking, was not realistic. There was little uptake from the targeted population.
- A successful step occurred when staff from one organization took a particular interest, and saw the value of walking for their own health, and for the people they served. This success provided an early spark to the project.

Realignment Phase: “Go where there is interest!”

During the realignment phase, two major things happened to help move the project forward in a new direction.

- First, Catholic Social Services, an organization that Gillespie had been working with, expressed interest in forming a walking group for their workplace. Although having an employee walking group was not an original target population for the project, Gillespie felt that the group would be helpful because it was located in central Edmonton, it serves clients in the CWP target populations, and it could be sustainable, serving as an example for other walking groups to follow. Gillespie therefore spent time and effort helping to establish this group and put supports in place so that it would continue over the long-term. She explains, “I also felt that if the organization valued walking and physical activity, it might trickle down into the services they provided to their client populations.”
- Second, Gillespie decided more advertisement and communication of the project was needed. Using the Alberta Centre for Active Living’s network she sent e-mail communications to practitioners, targeting those in Edmonton. From this e-mail, she received several responses from practitioner and community leaders who were interested.

Interest was expressed throughout Edmonton. Those that expressed interest were not always part of the target population.

According to Gillespie, it became clear that a realignment of geographic and demographic focus was necessary. The project expanded to include all of Edmonton. As well, those that did step up to be leaders were encouraged and supported to start a walking group.

Realignment Phase Lessons and Successes:
- Success: Accessing established networks, such as the Alberta Centre for Active Living’s network of practitioner contacts, proved to be very beneficial to spreading the word about the project.
- Lesson Learned: Not every individual is ready to make the change and start walking. Time and efforts should go to work with individuals who do not want to make a change to add more walking or physical activity to their routines.
- Lesson Learned: In many cases, simply forming a walking group does not always work over the long-term. Gillespie found that by approaching groups of people who were already gathered for another reason, she could educate the existing group about the benefits of walking. The prior stability of the group gives the walking group a better chance of long-term success.

Refinement Phase: “Support the interest that exists!”

In November 2010, the CWP began a refinement phase. At this stage, the resources of the project became more streamlined to specifically support and sustain the current walking groups.
As of mid-November, seven walking groups were in place, including two workplace groups, a seniors group, and several community-based groups.

Gillespie suggests that opportunities to engage with interested community members and groups and is still a big part of the project, but much of the project work and time is focused on sustaining and supporting existing groups.

“For example, the project held a workshop in October to train people to lead and coordinate walking groups,” notes Gillespie. “Walking group leaders have become a critical piece in ensuring that walking groups are sustained in the long run.”

Refinement Phase Successes and Challenges:

- **Success**: Offering a well-attended walking leaders workshop. The two-hour workshop was facilitated by an exercise specialist. Some of the workshop topics included proper walking technique, the F.I.T.T. Principle (Frequency, Intensity, Time and Type), safety and basic diabetes information.
- **Challenges**: Establishing a network of community services to help support the walking leaders has been difficult. The network and supports may have to be sustained by the walking leaders themselves.

Looking Ahead

As with any project that takes on a community development approach, the CWP has shown that there many challenges and lessons to be learned along the way.

The CWP will continue to focus on sustainability of the walking groups over the next several months, until the end of March 2011. After that, Gillespie suggests that there will be more insights and lessons to share with other practitioners.

If you would like to know more about the CWP, contact Dianne Gillespie at the Alberta Centre for Active Living, e-mail: dianne.gillespie@ualberta.ca, phone: 780-952-4451

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