

Executive Summary

The *ACSM American Fitness Index™* (AFI) program can help city planners, policy makers, health educators, and other professionals understand how the health of the city, its residents, and community assets that support healthy lifestyles compare to other cities nationwide. The AFI data report includes health indicators such as the percentage of people who exercise regularly, maintain a healthy weight, eat the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables, have access to health care, have health insurance, and don't smoke. Environmental factors included the availability of parks, walking/bike trails, and public transportation.

The *AFI Community Action Guide* is designed to serve as a companion tool to the *ACSM American Fitness Index™* data report. It is intended to support and advance groundwork that has already begun, as well as to assist communities that have not yet started to address physical activity. It is hoped that the guide will help to facilitate the efforts of government leaders; non-profit organizations; community-based physical activity and smart growth coalitions; medical centers/hospitals; and professionals in the fields of public health, planning, zoning, community development, transportation, parks, recreation, education, youth services, and aging services.

The *AFI Community Action Guide* supports efforts to address community challenges and encourages communities and neighborhoods of all sizes to focus efforts to help improve the health of their residents. The guide is not a “how-to manual,” but rather an overview of the critical factors related to effective community action with suggested practical tools and resources.

Many of the tools and resources listed in the guide do offer detailed “how-to” information. These resources are also listed on the AFI Web site (www.americanfitnessindex.org).

The *AFI Community Action Guide* is organized into sections on leadership, coalitions, planning, monitoring and evaluation, and advocacy.

Leadership

A first step in addressing health and physical activity through community programming and intervention is to identify and engage passionate, committed leaders. These individuals are catalysts who can begin the strategic planning process, engage the community, recruit and develop a strong coalition, lead concerted public policy and advocacy efforts to create systems change in communities, and help assure sustainability of efforts.

There are two types of volunteer leaders that might be involved in community action – figurehead leaders and actively-engaged leaders.

A figurehead leader might be an individual who lends their name and image to efforts, but who might not be able to provide much hands-on involvement. This type of individual might be recruited as an honorary chairperson of a coalition or partnership. These individuals are typically celebrities, professional sports figures, CEOs of major businesses, or high-ranking elected officials. Their positions and time commitments often preclude them from becoming engaged significantly in ongoing activities, but they can bring several important resources to the table.

The prominent status of some people can often attract others into a coalition or group. For example, an invitation to join a coalition that is extended from a renowned community leader might garner better results than an invitation from an agency staff person. Also, this type of leader is able to facilitate networking opportunities and open doors to other resources that have value for the community initiative. This might include funding support from community and regional foundations or access to key elected officials. If a community leader has significant resources at their disposal (such as a CEO or major philanthropist), they might be able to provide direct financial or in-kind support (staff, office space, overhead, equipment, or meeting space.) Prominent community figures can also be excellent spokespersons for an issue or cause. Their time might be used when you need presentations made to policy making groups such as city council, state legislatures, foundations, or the media.

An actively engaged leader is someone who has demonstrated leadership capabilities, is committed to improvement in the community, and is willing to give their time to be actively involved in your efforts. Initially you might identify a small number of these leaders to help your community initiative get off the ground. This type of leader is typically someone who is already passionate about your issue or cause. They might be an officer or senior staff member of an agency that shares common goals or missions with your community issues. You might recruit several leaders who can function as an executive committee. Their roles may transition as your coalition or group grows, though hopefully they will remain involved and assume roles such as committee chairs.

The roles and expectations for your leadership need to be clearly communicated to the people who are being asked to serve. A formal method to do this would be to develop a “volunteer leadership job description” that outlines roles and expectations. If it is possible to outline the amount of time that will be requested, this can also be helpful, since it will help your leaders have a comprehensive understanding of the role they will be taking on.

Some community-based initiatives are fortunate to have assigned staff members. Staff might be individuals from a lead agency or organization whose time has been allocated specifically to the initiative. Or a grant or other funding mechanism might enable an initiative to secure a staff person (or people). Staff who are involved in community-based initiatives at a leadership level, usually possess many of the competencies of volunteer leaders. In addition, they are likely to also have responsibilities such as fiscal management, activity follow-up and reporting, assuring that plans are developed and appropriately monitored, operational functions, communication, volunteer coordination, and responsibility for providing information to the media and policy makers.

Coalitions

A coalition is a group of individuals and groups working together to achieve a shared goal. Coalition members should represent the diverse interests of the community. Their backgrounds might include government; nonprofit organizations; medical institutions; academia; and faith, civic, youth, and business groups. Engaged members with a shared sense of direction, defined objectives, and a realistic action plan can help assure success.

The functions of a coalition might include community awareness, education, and strengthening knowledge; educating policy makers and influencing public and private policy issues; building support for improvements in infrastructure; and changing organizational practices.

When launching a coalition, the vision, mission, goals, and objectives should be discussed and agreed on. Determining how the coalition will function from an operational perspective is a good next step.

There are several factors that are critical to the success of coalitions. These include having systems for good communication, listening to opposing points of view, establishing decision-making processes, determining how tasks will be delegated, and celebrating success.

Planning

A clear vision and agreement of the end goals is essential for success. Effective planning provides a clear focus, supports monitoring and assessment of results, facilitates new program development, and enables an organization or coalition to look into the future in an orderly and systematic way. Most organizations and coalitions understand the need for annual program objectives and a program-focused work plan. Funders require them, and they provide a basis for setting priorities, organizing work, and assessing progress.

An initial step in planning is to define a vision. The vision communicates what your organization believes are the ideal conditions for your community and how things would look if the issue important to you were perfectly addressed. By developing a vision statement, your organization makes the beliefs and governing principles of your organization clear to the greater community (as well as to your own members).

One important part of the planning process is to conduct a needs assessment. This enables you to obtain and analyze information to determine the current status and service needs of a defined population and/or geographic area. Without a needs assessment it is easy to jump to developing a list of solutions before you have an adequate understanding of issues and problems from the broad community perspective. One method of conducting a needs assessment is using asset mapping, a process of identifying community resources that will help accomplish goals. Asset mapping is focused on identifying a community's capacity-what the resources are in a community. Community capacity looks at all assets related to the community project including people, relationships, infrastructures, and financial resources. Knowing the assets of a community sets a foundation for effective planning.

When assets are identified, needs can be determined. This is done through a gap analysis – a process of comparing actual community assets to potential, desired assets. Once this step has been taken, plans can be developed to work to close the gap between the two.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Every good plan needs an evaluation component. The evaluation process helps you understand what progress is being made toward your goals, what is effective, and what is not working. Realizing what is not working is critical, so you can make mid-course corrections rather than continuing to do things that are not producing results.

The benefits of evaluation are that results are important to funders; evaluation enables you to measure and celebrate successes and build trust within your coalition.

Public Policy/Advocacy

Advocacy allows organizations to promote their causes by educating the public, community decision makers, and policymakers. At the community level, public policy generally refers to laws, codes, and regulations established by governing entities such as city councils, departments of transportation, zoning commissions, county commissioners, or the state legislature. Regulations and codes might also be established by community agencies such as planning departments, water departments, school boards, and parks and recreation departments.

In order to impact policy change, it is necessary to first educate policy makers about the issues that your coalition is concerned with. Research-based information and fact sheets on the benefits of physical activity and negative health consequences of inactivity are important to develop. Excellent sources for this type of information are the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Physical Activity and Obesity (<http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/>), your state health department (an easy way to get to state information is to Google the name of your state and the words “health department”), the American College of Sports Medicine (www.acsm.org), and local medical schools or schools of public health at your area universities.

To create systemic lifestyle changes in communities, policy change is often necessary. Consider, for example, the work that has been done in tobacco reduction. Educating smokers about the negative health impact of tobacco only went so far in reducing tobacco use. However, once laws went into place regarding clean indoor air, tobacco excise taxes became significant enough to deter many from purchasing cigarettes, and smoking became socially unacceptable in most public places and businesses, real change began to occur.

Community-based organizations that want to participate in policy issues need to have a clear understanding of who makes decisions, how decisions are made, and how policies are introduced and established. One way to learn how your community government works and who you should meet with is to look at your city, county and council of government (COG) websites or invite representatives from policy-making entities to speak to your coalition.

In addition to public policy that is put into place by lawmakers and regulatory agencies, policy can also be implemented by community institutions such as businesses and industries. You might consider working with business and industry leaders to address physical activity for their employees. Similar tactics to working with public policy officials generally work – one-on-one or small meetings and customized fact sheets that address the importance of physical activity from the employer’s standpoint.

Moving Forward

The road to success might be long, but you will find it invigorating. As you launch your efforts have at the forefront the ACSM American Fitness Index™ Guiding Principles for Healthy Communities:

- ◆ Overall health improvements in U.S. cities must focus on the prevention of behavior-linked diseases by effectively addressing the underlying risk and community factors.
- ◆ The rise in chronic diseases attributable to physical inactivity and unhealthy diets are a “clear and present danger” to our health and healthcare systems, our cities, our nation, and our future.
- ◆ All cities in the U.S., irrespective of size or current health status, can make powerful advances in improving the health of their people through simple, affordable, effective steps.
- ◆ There is a need for even more synergy and collaboration to assist U.S. cities in actively making the move toward better health.