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Rural Communities Take Strides to Become More Walkable and Bikeable

Issue: Two of the most recent Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNA) by Woodbury County identified obesity as a priority problem. Seventy percent of the population was categorized as either overweight or obese. Adult obesity rates had climbed to an all-time high of 34%. The number of children walking or biking to or from school has dropped. Walk Scores vary greatly among communities in Woodbury County. Walk Score® is the only international measure of walkability. It measures on a scale from 0 - 100 based on walking routes to destinations such as grocery stores, schools, parks, restaurants and retail. Woodbury County communities' walk scores range from 1-53. According to 2012 BRFSS City/County data, 25% of Sioux City Metropolitan Statistical Area did not participate in any physical activities during the last month. When made aware of the issue through the CHNA, the County Board of Health gave the Siouxland District Health Department (SDHD) authority to apply for local foundation and state and federal funding to address the issue.



Taking Action: SDHD has specifically focused on improving the walkability and bikeability of rural communities for the past two and half years. With a CDC grant, SDHD staff began working to increase opportunities for increased physical activity in Sergeant Bluff, Merville, Salix and Lawton. These rural communities formed coalitions of city and school officials, parents, residents, SDHD and the Siouxland Interstate Metropolitan Planning Council to take action.

The coalitions identified safe routes that students from all neighborhoods could take to safely get to or from school. Walkability audits were conducted on those routes using the Walking and Biking Suitability Assessment (WABSA). Photos of the problem spots were taken and linked via a GPS locator on cell phones. The problem areas were then mapped and

included on a story board summary document. Results and recommendations were summarized and presented to each coalition. The coalitions then prioritized the recommendations and presented their results with priority improvements to the local city councils and school boards.

Several infrastructure and system level improvements have been made in each community including: new ramps, truncated domes and new sidewalks were installed; an unsafe brick residential sidewalk was replaced; a pedestrian bridge was built to connect a new residential development to a recreational complex; pedestrian traffic flow was modified around an elementary school, bike racks were installed, crosswalks were painted, school crossing guards and new stop signs were added, and a 2-way stop was converted to a 4-way stop with a LED flashing light.

To ensure sustainability of complete street initiatives, one community has developed a Complete Streets Review Committee. This committee will be able to offer recommendations to the city staff, planning and zoning commission, city council and board of adjustments as necessary for various plan reviews for new developments. Two of the communities have also added a line item for infrastructure dollars into their cities' annual budget to improve sidewalks, trails and streets.

Several Safe Routes to School programs were also initiated with several hundred students participating in walking school buses, Bike to School Day, bike rodeos and bicycle and pedestrian safety presentations.

Impact: In two short years, rural communities in Woodbury County have made great strides in advancing their community infrastructure and policies to increase physical activity options for their residents. By allowing, encouraging, and providing safe opportunities for children to walk or bike to and from school, parents are helping their children get the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity a day. This reduces their risk of obesity. By improving walkability infrastructures throughout communities all residents are provided more opportunity for physical activity.

Taken together, these efforts, recommended by CDC, support healthier lifestyle choices. (See <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5807a1.htm>)

