

Counties and Municipalities in Delaware Can Develop Complete Streets to Combat Childhood Obesity

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Planting the seeds for better health

SUMMARY

1. Walking and biking—to school, work, or for recreation—are difficult to do in neighborhoods without “complete streets.” Complete streets are roadways designed and operated to enable safe access for pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and public transit users of all ages and abilities.
2. Complete streets promote physical activity. A growing body of research indicates that children are more physically active if they can walk or ride a bicycle from home to school or other locations.¹
3. Delaware is one of 18 states with a complete streets policy, established by the Complete Streets Executive Order signed by Governor Jack Markell on April 24, 2009, in conjunction with the first annual Delaware Bicycle Summit.
4. Counties and municipalities have the opportunity to take a variety of steps, outlined in this paper, to facilitate complete streets throughout Delaware.

Introduction

Childhood obesity prevalence is increasing at an alarming rate in the United States. Over the last 40 years, childhood obesity has more than quadrupled among 6-11 year-olds and more than tripled among 12-19 year-olds.² All states are experiencing this epidemic, including Delaware. Thirty-seven percent of children in Delaware are overweight or obese.³ Regular physical activity helps maintain a healthy weight and prevent heart disease, type 2 diabetes and other chronic diseases. Children who grow up in families that are physically active are more likely to continue being physically active into adulthood, when compared to their peers raised in families with more sedentary lifestyles.⁴

Physical Activity and the Built Environment

The built environment, which encompasses all buildings, spaces and products created or modified by people, including homes, schools, parks/

recreation areas, greenways, business areas and transportation systems⁵, is where children live, learn and play. It can be constructed to offer more, or less, opportunity for children and adults to engage in safe physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle. For instance, one study found that each additional hour spent driving on a daily basis is associated with a 6% increase in the odds of becoming obese, while each additional kilometer walked is associated with a nearly 5% reduction in this likelihood.⁶

Public Demand for Walkable and Bikeable Communities

Public opinion polls underscore public demand for walking and biking options in communities. A study cited by the National Complete Streets Coalition found that residents in Lake Worth, Florida were willing to pay \$20,000 more for homes in pedestrian-friendly communities.⁷ A nationwide survey found that 55% of Americans want to walk more on a daily basis to get

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About Nemours Health and Prevention Services

Nemours Health and Prevention Services (NHPS) is a division of Nemours, one of the nation's largest pediatric health systems, operating the Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children and outpatient facilities throughout the Delaware Valley and northern and central Florida.

The goal of NHPS is to drive long-term improvements in policies and practices that promote child health, and to leverage community strengths and resources to help children grow up healthy. An initial area of emphasis is the prevention of childhood obesity through promotion of healthy lifestyles, the centerpiece of which is the *5-2-1-Almost None* campaign (see sidebar on p.2 for more details). NHPS is also launching an initiative to promote children's social and emotional health.





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Our Formula for a Healthy Lifestyle: 5-2-1-Almost None

NHPS is taking a leading role to help people understand the causes and health implications of obesity and the best ways to promote healthier lifestyles among children and families.

5-2-1-Almost None is our formula for a healthy lifestyle.



- Eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.
- Spend no more than two hours per day in front of a screen (TV, video games, recreational computer time).
- Get at least one hour of physical activity per day.
- Drink almost no sugary beverages like soda and sports drinks.

For more information about our work to make Delaware's Kids the Healthiest in the Nation, visit: www.GrowUpHealthy.org

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exercise or travel to specific destinations, and 63% want to walk more to stores and other locations to take care of errands. Large percentages of those surveyed identified sidewalks, places to take walks, and being within walking distance of stores, restaurants, schools and public transportation as important considerations when choosing where to live.⁸

Complete Streets Promote Active Living

By definition, complete streets are roadways designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and public transit users of all ages and abilities.⁹ Complete streets incorporate a variety of pedestrian-, bicycle- and transit-friendly features like sidewalks, medians, raised crosswalks, bike lanes and special bus lanes, all designed within the context of the community. Complete streets policies ensure that transportation agencies routinely design and operate the entire right of way to enable safe access for all users.

Complete streets improve pedestrian safety. A study cited by the National Complete Streets Coalition found that designing the street in a pedestrian-friendly manner by redesigning intersections and sidewalks and installing raised medians reduces pedestrian risk by as much as 28%.¹⁰ This opens up additional safe travel options for the nearly one-third of Americans who do not drive, which include low-income Americans who cannot afford cars, all children under 16 and an increasing number of older adults.

Complete streets create safe routes to school for children. In the past, walking and biking to school were traditional ways for children to get physical activity, but now this is in decline.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that in 1969, approximately half of all children walked or biked to and from school, with 87% of those living within one mile of school walking or biking. Today, fewer than 15% of children walk or bike to school. One-quarter of trips to school are made on a school bus, and more than half of all children commute to school in private automobiles.¹¹

Research demonstrates that children engage in more regular, sustained physical activity when they can walk or bike from home to school or other destinations.¹² The presence of sidewalks, safe street crossings and reduced vehicle speeds in school zones make it more likely children will walk or bike to school.¹³

The CDC's comprehensive recommendations for promoting healthy eating and active living and reducing the prevalence of obesity identified enhancing traffic safety as a key strategy for creating safe communities that support physical activity.¹⁴ This recommendation, along with several others related to creating pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly communities, point to the public health community's mounting support for complete streets as an effective approach to promote physical activity.

In addition, a policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics underscores the importance of pediatricians advocating for environmental improvements to promote physical activity. They also encourage counseling patient families to participate in Safe Routes to School programs or advocate for creating them.¹⁵

Complete Streets Benefit Communities

In addition to promoting children's health, complete streets benefit

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communities in a variety of ways, including:

- Increasing the capacity of the transportation network and reducing congestion;
- Making more efficient use of taxpayer dollars and avoiding costs associated with retrofitting transportation projects in the future;
- Increasing property values and job growth;
- Fighting climate change by reducing air pollution;
- Reducing automobile trips, which can decrease oil dependence; and
- Fostering strong communities.¹⁶

Complete streets policies at the national and local levels have attracted a wide coalition of supporters among different stakeholders, including elected officials, land use and transportation planners, realtors, public health professionals, environmental groups, retired citizens, and neighborhood associations.

Complete Streets Policy in Delaware

More than 100 complete streets policies are in place across the country. These policies were implemented without significant cost increases because incorporating accommodations for pedestrians, bicyclists and public transit results in additional expenses that are a fraction of a transportation project's total budget.¹⁷ The costs associated with incorporating these features up-front are much lower when compared to the expenses associated with retrofit projects.

In Delaware, Governor Jack Markell signed a Complete Streets Executive Order on April 24, 2009 that orders DelDOT to create, adopt and implement a complete streets policy. Once adopted,

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RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

For counties and municipalities

- 1** If not already included, update the comprehensive plan to incorporate strategies for developing a transportation system that includes non-motorized transportation options like walking, biking and public transit.
- 2** Create pedestrian and bicycle master plans in cooperation with DelDOT and DNREC to identify goals and strategies and provide guidelines for creating a pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly community.
- 3** Develop zoning ordinances that create complete streets by requiring the inclusion of pedestrian and bicycle facilities in new development projects.

For parents and concerned citizens

- 1** Work with your local school on Safe Routes to School initiatives to promote walking and biking to school. For more information, visit www.srts.deldot.gov.
- 2** Participate in DelDOT's public hearings for transportation projects in your community to advocate for making roadways complete streets. To learn more about public hearings, visit www.deldot.gov.
- 3** Enroll as a Campaigner to advocate for improvements to the built environment in Delaware that enable children and families to live the 5-2-1-Almost None lifestyle at www.MakingKidsHealthy.org.

Built Environments that Support Active Living

NHPS and our partners aim to influence the land use patterns and transportation systems that make up the built environment in Delaware to ensure those systems enable healthy lifestyles and make the 5-2-1-Almost None behaviors attainable for children and families throughout the state.

NHPS recommends the following strategies for promoting health through the land use and transportation planning processes:

- Utilizing more compact and mixed land use that shortens the distance between destinations;
- Developing a transportation system that offers a variety of safe and convenient non-motorized transportation options for traveling to routine destinations and removes barriers to walking and biking;
- Locating parks, trails and greenways close to neighborhoods; and
- Encouraging supermarkets and farmers markets to locate in easily accessible areas to increase public access to fruits and vegetables.

To view a slideshow demonstration of complete streets design in action, visit www.MakingKidsHealthy.org.

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Delaware will become one of 18 states with a complete street policy.¹⁸

The executive order calls for the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) to create a complete streets policy that will promote safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and bus riders of all ages, so that they can safely move along and across the streets of Delaware.

The policy will not only address individual roads, but also change the decision-making and design process so that all users are considered in planning, designing, building, operating and maintaining all roadways.¹⁹ This policy complements several ongoing DelDOT initiatives designed to promote pedestrian and bicycle safety, including a State Bicycle Plan, Statewide Pedestrian Action Plan, and implementation of a sidewalk inventory.

Conclusion

Complete streets make it possible for children to walk or bike to school and work toward achieving their one hour of physical activity recommended by NHPS. Regular physical activity helps with healthy weight maintenance and prevention of chronic disease.

The public health community is increasingly supportive of complete streets policies as an effective approach to promote physical activity and address the obesity epidemic. Residents, counties and municipalities can play an important role in promoting complete streets in Delaware.

Notes

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4. Nemours Health and Prevention Services (2005). *Delaware Children's Health Chartbook*, Newark, Delaware.
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