



Traffic Safety Center

Setting New Directions in Traffic Safety

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Safer Streets for Older Adults—and Everyone Else

Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors promotes pedestrian-friendly communities for walkers of all ages



Creating "walkable" neighborhoods, where walking and biking are both appealing and safe, can be especially advantageous for the pedestrian groups that are most likely to be injured in a collision with a motor vehicle, studies show. Programs like Safe Routes to School, which emphasize physical activity and pedestrian safety for children, are becoming increasingly popular as ways to achieve the goal of safer, more walkable neighborhoods. Less visible, however, are movements that promote safety for older adults, a population segment that faces many of the same challenges as young pedestrians and stands to reap the same benefits from neighborhoods that are pedestrian-friendly.

One such movement is United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County's Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors program. It works with older adults in Oakland and the nearby communities of Ashland and Cherryland. The program, begun in November 2003, shares a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant with sister programs in Sacramento and Los Angeles.

"The primary goals are to increase the amount of walking that older adults do—to identify the barriers that keep adults from walking, and then to dissolve those barriers," says Lucy Bullard, Community Organizer for United Seniors of Oakland and Alameda County, a non-profit group that administers the program. "It's to educate older adults, and to talk to them about what needs to be done to make an

environment walkable."

The program sponsors task forces that bring pedestrian advocates, older adults, and other community members together in monthly meetings to assess current projects and discuss future interventions and events. It also sponsors walkability audits that identify environmental barriers to walking in the three communities. "Walk Clubs," composed of older adults who walk together for purposes of socialization and increased safety, are a third element. So far, there are six, all overseen by Bullard.

"The goal is to convey the idea that you can walk out of your front door and see walking as a way to access what you need to in your neighborhood, to use walking as a mobility device," Bullard says. "A lot of older adults jaywalk, or some are so scared to cross the street that they don't even want to walk across the street [at an intersection or crosswalk]. It's about building up self-esteem so they can walk across safely.... There's this general notion that in some point in your life, [driving] is going to be taken away from you. I want to prevent problems in the case that older drivers lose their license or are no longer able to drive. I want to give them options when transit is also not going to be able to meet their needs."

As part of her work with the walk clubs, which meet weekly, Bullard walks through neighborhoods with older adults on an almost daily basis, observing both the personal barriers and the environmental barriers that discourage older adults from walking. The walk clubs, Bullard says, are intended to make walking an enjoyable, non-threatening activity for older adults and to teach pedestrian safety skills.

"It gives the opportunity for local seniors to gather in a designated area, which increases their safety, their visibility as a group, instead of having to walk individually. If we walk in a herd of people it increases safety, and it's a great way to provide a support system for people. We encourage people who use walking aids such as walkers.... We have seniors in their 80s who can walk circles around me, and we have individuals in their 60s who have trouble walking around the block."

Barriers to Walking Among Older Adults

With the older adult population on the rise as the baby boomer generation approaches its retirement years, older adult mobility will become an even more serious issue—an issue complicated not just by numbers, but by cultural attitudes. This is the first generation to come of age when car ownership was the standard, not a luxury, so its members have always taken car accessibility for granted, and their living habits reflect this attitude. A 2002 report from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (*see sidebar to download report*), the regional transportation agency for the San Francisco Bay Area, showed that not only do "more and more seniors live outside central cities where transit service works best" but that "if people who are in their later working years continue to live where they do today, then it is likely that, in the future, even more older adults will live in new suburbs and other areas with

limited transit space." According to the report, in the year 2000, 53 percent of seniors in the San Francisco Bay Area lived in areas with no access to basic transit services.

Even when transit services are available, older adults may have difficulty walking to transit stops or stations. The MTC found that "Forty-nine percent of non-drivers said they could not walk to a bus stop if they needed to." However, the study's participants said that they would walk to transit if resting places were implemented along the way, sidewalks were improved, and if stops were located within five blocks of their home.

As older adults move through their retirement years, lessened abilities, especially reduced vision, often make driving difficult or impossible. Older adults who have minimized their driving trips or eliminated driving from their routine altogether may turn to walking or to transit, which often involves walking trips to and from bus and train stops, in order to remain mobile. In fact, for many older adults, walking trips are not just an alternative to driving but a way to improve health and stay connected to their communities. However, the MTC report found that in a survey of Bay Area older adults, major barriers to walking included missing, narrow or poorly maintained sidewalks, intersections where sidewalks are missing or markings are faded, wide streets and walk and signal times that are too short, and lax enforcement of traffic and parking regulations.

How Older Walkers Are Overlooked

Even when it comes to implementing new transit systems and making the built environment more pedestrian-friendly, the needs of older adults may be overlooked not once, but twice, first by programs and neighborhood designs that explicitly promote travel by transit, foot or bike but fail to address adequately the safety concerns of all individuals, and second by planners and organizers who consider safety as a whole but neglect the specific needs of older adults.

"Many walkable community projects utilize principles of walkability but do not specifically consider senior needs in their designs," says Patti Yanocho, Program Coordinator for the Older Adults Injury Prevention Projects and Project Coordinator for the Center for Injury Prevention Policy and Practice at San Diego State University. "Given that about 40 percent of pedestrian deaths in California are seniors, this is something that should be a high priority for such projects.

Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors

Like Safe Routes to School, Walkable Neighborhoods for Seniors gives strong emphasis to pedestrian safety concerns. The walking clubs, for instance, allow the program to identify the personal and environmental barriers to walking that walk club

participants perceive.

"The personal barriers [such as fear of walking] get worked out in the walking club. [Seniors] work on promoting each other. People get really excited when someone new shows up. We basically just encourage a commitment to oneself. With physical barriers, you first make sure people are contacting their doctor before engaging in new forms of physical activity, then starting off slow if that's what they need to do, saying, 'It's OK if your legs hurt, let's identify that'—you know, 'Walk five steps and turn around if that's what you need to do.'"

Bullard admits that even active participants in the walk clubs sometimes have a hard time stepping out on their own—taking it upon themselves to run errands on foot or even walk to the walking club meeting at the senior center, alone. People's behaviors don't change overnight, she notes. Eventually, she hopes participants will take the initiative to form walking groups that are not under her direct supervision.

"The main thing is the stories I hear," Bullard says. "People say, 'My balance has just gotten better because I participate in walking activity.' I take my successes when I can. It's behavior modification and that takes time."

Photo: Dan Burden, <http://www.pedbikeimages.org>
