Mebane on the Move: A Community-Based Initiative to Reduce Childhood Obesity
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A growing body of evidence suggests that physical activity levels are affected by environmental factors. Residents of walkable neighborhoods who have access to recreation facilities are more physically active and less likely to be obese [1-5]. The availability of safe areas for outdoor activity, such as parks and other open spaces, is consistently associated with increased physical activity among children [2-7]. A handful of community-based health promotion initiatives aim to increase physical activity through enhancement of the built environment. Shape Up Somerville [8-9], for example, is a campaign to increase physical activity and improve healthy eating throughout the city of Somerville, Massachusetts. The Mebane on the Move initiative is a similar community-based campaign that is currently under way in North Carolina.

Mebane is a small, relatively rural community nestled between Research Triangle Park and the Triad. This former factory and farming town is now experiencing a rapid shift toward urbanization with the arrival of strip malls, big-box stores, fast-food restaurants, and a multimillion dollar outlet center. During this time of transition and vulnerability, Mebane’s leaders have acknowledged the need for mindful planning for growth and development. In 2006, a group of concerned residents recognized an opportunity to help guide the future of their community and began to raise funds that were eventually used to launch the Mebane on the Move initiative in 2011. Mebane on the Move is a grassroots campaign to improve the health of residents through enhancement of the built environment and establishment of sustainable opportunities for active living. Using a socioecological model as its framework, the campaign has built on the burgeoning evidence that the built environment can affect physical activity in all age groups. The Mebane on the Move initiative includes business leaders, faith communities, schools, government officials, and local health professionals. The initiative has worked to leverage existing partnerships and to encourage new collaborations through community engagement, ongoing evaluation of intervention efforts, a vibrant social media campaign, and frequent feedback from citizens.

Mebane on the Move has engaged in a number of activities to improve the built environment, including the establishment of an urban walking trail throughout the town, elementary school running clubs, and free physical activity classes for community members. Initiative leaders have also worked with city officials to install new sidewalks and crosswalks, and to link existing sidewalks for the walking trail. They have also proposed improvements to the routes, including sidewalk repairs and additional lighting. The city installed 60 colorful engraved stone pavers in sidewalks to guide walkers and runners throughout town.

To establish the elementary school running clubs, Mebane on the Move partnered with the Mebane Running Club and the local public elementary schools. Participating students in kindergarten through fifth grade run after school, learn about the components of a healthy lifestyle, and earn prizes for increasing their mileage. The students complete the program by running their first 5-kilometer race as a team. Over the past 2 years, the program has served more than 500 students; 120 adult coaches have participated, providing an opportunity for many students to be physically active in a supportive and team-oriented environment.

Adult residents of Mebane have cited structured exercise classes as an important way for them to stay fit. However, these may be cost-prohibitive for some residents, so Mebane on the Move helped establish MeFit, a free group exercise program open to the community. To date, all of the evidence is increasing that social influence plays a key role in driving health behaviors, particularly in populations with poor access to resources. For example, data from the Framingham study indicated that obesity can be spread through social networks, and subsequent studies have shown that social networks also affect behaviors such as tobacco abuse and that they positively influence mental health [19]. These same networks have been identified by our research team in Charlotte to be of key importance to Hispanic immigrants as they work to navigate the US health care system.
10-week aerobic dance, yoga, pilates, water aerobics, and circuit classes that have been offered have been filled to maximum capacity. The 80 current participants range in age from 20 to 72 years and encompass all levels of fitness.

Before launching the initiative, Mebane on the Move leaders engaged researchers from Duke University to study its effects. To evaluate this natural experiment and help assess the impact of the intervention, the researchers recruited a second town to serve as the comparison community, one with similar geographic and demographic characteristics. The comparison community is located approximately 100 miles from the intervention town, so it is close enough to allow for travel for data collection but far enough away to avoid contamination. The researchers conducted baseline assessments in both communities in the spring of 2011. The Mebane on the Move initiative was launched in the fall of 2011, and follow-up data collection was completed in early summer 2012. Results are forthcoming.

Mebane on the Move and similar grassroots campaigns have the potential to increase physical activity in all age groups through systematic changes to the built environment. In smaller towns, where social networks are strong and residents are invested in their communities, these types of initiatives can empower citizens to engage in healthier lifestyles. Promoting community-level health and well-being is a public health priority. Mebane on the Move is a promising initiative and a step toward achieving this important goal in North Carolina.

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References


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