KEEPING KIDS MOVING: HOW EQUITABLE TRANSPORTATION POLICY CAN PREVENT CHILDHOOD OBESITY TOOLKIT

What it is.

This toolkit provides information to help communities across the United States advocate for and offer safe, effective, and affordable transportation systems for all children. The information provided will present tools, resources, and promising solutions to help ensure investments in transportation are made equitably in order to guarantee that underserved communities from urban and rural areas across the country can access the resources they need to lead healthy lives.

Background

Our nation faces an obesity crisis, especially among low-income children and children of color. Today, nearly one-third of children and adolescents are overweight or obese, and physical inactivity is a leading cause of this epidemic.[1] Equitable transportation policy that fosters healthy, opportunity-rich communities has a critical role to play in reversing childhood obesity.

Efforts at the local, state, and federal levels to improve access to a variety of transportation options must be supported to help promote physically active lifestyles and decrease obesity rates, especially among low-income children and children of color, who frequently live in communities that have little or no efficient, reliable access to alternative modes of transportation. The current car-centered transportation focus further limits the ability of children to be physically active outdoors due to high levels of pollution in communities near highways and truck routes, which poses both direct and indirect health consequences.[2] Many underserved communities suffer from a lack of safe, complete sidewalks or bicycle paths, making walking and biking difficult and often dangerous. Consequently, these neighborhoods have low levels of physical activity and high rates of obesity and obesity-related chronic diseases. Therefore, it is critical to advocate for and create equitable transportation systems that offer opportunities for safe, active transportation options for all children and provide families with resources they need to lead healthy lifestyles.

The federal transportation authorization bill - currently known as the *Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users* (SAFETEA-LU) - is the law that governs the administration of federal transportation policy and the allocation of funds to federal agencies, states, tribes, and municipalities. The bill reflects the long-term goals of Congress for the country's roads, railways, ferries, and mass transit facilities. Every six years Congress revisits the federal transportation bill in an effort to improve federally funded transportation projects and address the transportation needs of communities across the nation.

Current federal transportation policy provides a relatively weak funding match for public transportation compared to a considerably higher funding match for state highway construction. Approximately 80 percent of federal transportation expenditure goes toward highways, while the infrastructure for all other modes of transportation competes for the remaining 20 percent.[3] This negatively impacts low-income communities and communities of color as residents in these areas are less likely to own cars[4] and rely more on public transportation for mobility and for access to basic services.

In June of 2009, Congress began to consider a multibillion dollar, multiyear federal transportation authorization bill to succeed SAFETEA-LU, which expired in September 2009.[5] Congress is currently working on a replacement bill, the Surface Transportation Authorization Act (STAA), for the next six-year period. STAA establishes priorities, as well as funding categories and requirements, and in some cases gives cities and metropolitan regions the flexibility to shape strategies that address local needs. The law is a chance to design communities to maximize economic opportunity, health, accessibility, and sustainability and to give all children in the United States clean, affordable, safe options for active transportation. It is therefore critical for all advocates, parents, schools, youth, policymakers, community-based organizations, and all community stakeholders, to play a role in designing and promoting safe, effective and affordable transportation systems.

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[1] Active Living Research, "Active Education-Physical Education, Physical Activity and Academic Performance." *Research Brief*, San Diego, Fifth Avenue. August 2009.

[2] PolicyLink, Prevention Institute, and Convergence Partnership, *The Transportation Prescription: Bold New Ideas for Healthy, Equitable Transportation Reform in America*. 2009

[3] PolicyLink, (2009). *All Aboard! Making Equity and Inclusion Central to Federal Transportation Policy*. 2009.

[4] Thomas W. Sanchez et al., "Moving to Equity: Addressing Inequitable Effects of Transportation Policies on Minorities." The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2003.

[5] PolicyLink, *All Aboard! Making Equity and Inclusion Central to Federal Transportation Policy*. 2009.