The Non-Profit Sector: Leveraging Resources and Strengths to Promote More Physically Active Lifestyles

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**Background:** Many Americans do not meet current minimum physical activity recommendations. Although the choice to be physically active is made by individuals, that choice is affected by the social and physical environments in which people live, work, play and learn. Creating environments that are more supportive of physical activity will require policies, practices and programs that individuals may not be able to influence on their own; such changes will require comprehensive, coordinated and collaborative action by a variety of organizational sectors at national, state and local levels. Because of their core—and frequently unique—competencies, many nonprofit organizations are poised to be active players in promoting important changes in policy and community environments that can facilitate lifelong physical activity for all Americans.

**Methods:** Review of mission statements and strategic plans of a variety of nonprofit organizations reveal key characteristics and competencies that can be leveraged, frequently across multiple levels and sectors, to promote physical activity. **Key recommendations:** Nonprofit organizations should leverage their unique capabilities, particularly in the areas of advocacy, strategic collaborations and outreach to their membership, volunteer and/or constituent bases to promote policy and environmental changes in support of physical activity.

**Keywords:** public health, policy, community environment

Despite the health, economic and social benefits of physical activity, many Americans do not achieve minimum recommended levels of activity. While many people would like to live a more physically active life-style, they face important and real barriers to achieving this goal. Although the choice to be physically active is made by individuals, that choice is affected—either negatively or positively—by the social and physical environments in which people live, work, play and learn. Policies and practices in school systems and workplaces may present barriers to opportunities for physical activity during the day. Lack of access to sidewalks and parks and recreation facilities limits physical activity, and community design that creates barriers to walking and cycling for recreation and transportation and promotes dependence on travel by automobile also negatively affects physical activity levels. These and other barriers to physical activity are of particular concern for some population groups, including children, who are establishing behavioral patterns that can affect their long-term health, and lower income populations, who may face additional challenges and safety concerns that can limit opportunities for physical activity.

Evidence that supportive environments are essential if individuals are to have real and sustainable opportunities to choose a physically active lifestyle has been building over the past decade. In its 2001 Nutrition and Physical Activity Guidelines, the American Cancer Society included a first-ever Recommendation for Community Action—that public, private, and community organizations work together to provide safe, enjoyable, and accessible environments for physical activity in schools and workplaces and for transportation and recreation in communities. Subsequent guidelines from other public health organizations have followed suit. In addition, recent work has identified promising indicators of physical activity-friendly communities. These include land use environment, access to exercise facilities, transportation environment and economics, community aesthetics, travel patterns, land use economics, institutional and organizational policies, and promotion. These are issues that individuals on their own cannot influence significantly, but that many nonprofit organizations—because of their mission, structure and core competencies—could influence effectively. As a result, nonprofit organizations at the national, state and local levels have new opportunities to provide leadership and to promote important changes in policy and community environments that can facilitate lifelong physical activity for all Americans.
Helping to Create and Sustain the Physical Activity Movement: Why Non-Profit Organizations?

Nonprofit organizations have long been recognized as “a source of social cohesion, a laboratory of innovation, and a continually adaptable means of responding to emerging ideas, needs and communal opportunities.”9 Whether educational, health, charitable, civic, religious or other type of nonprofit, these organizations have many characteristics that make them effective players in helping to create, grow and sustain a true social movement, such as that needed to facilitate physically active lifestyles for all Americans.

Nonprofit organizations have been leaders in developing and promoting population-based nutrition and physical activity recommendations throughout the years,4 and recent progress demonstrates the active and meaningful role that nonprofits play in promoting the public’s health by successfully implementing those recommendations. Nonprofits have led movements to improve school meals and to promote menu labeling at chain restaurants;10 to engage communities across the country in creating more activity-friendly neighborhoods;11 to advocate for more parks, green space and funding for sidewalks and bike lanes;12,13 and to promote more active involvement of the medical community in promoting physically active lifestyles.14 Despite the frequent and ongoing challenges of limited resources (fiscal and human) and competing priorities, nonprofits have continually demonstrated their ability to identify an important public health issue, develop a strategic plan in response, and mobilize critical stakeholders to action. A variety of unique characteristics and competencies of nonprofits have been, and can continue to be, leveraged to improve physical activity levels among Americans. To that end, this paper will identify common characteristics among multiple types of nonprofit organizations and summarize recommendations for action by the nonprofit sector, recommendations that can also serve to inform other sectors of key roles that nonprofits may be able to play in collaborative efforts to promote more physically active lifestyles.

Methods

To identify what roles nonprofit organizations may be uniquely qualified to play in nationwide efforts to promote physical activity and to recommend appropriate actions for their ongoing involvement in such efforts, online reviews of the mission statements and/or strategic plans for physical activity, as well as current key initiatives, were conducted of a variety of nonprofit organizations. Organizations included (but were not limited to) those with a disease prevention and/or health promotion focus (such as the American Heart Association and the YMCA of the USA); those that target particular audiences of health professionals (such as the American College of Sports Medicine); and those that target particular age groups (such as the Boy Scouts of America and the Boys and Girls Club of America). Review of the mission statements, strategic plans and current initiatives revealed numerous common characteristics that could be leveraged both within the nonprofit sector and across other sectors to build capacity to support more physically active lifestyles for all Americans.

Infrastructure

To influence physical activity behaviors, coordinated action will be required at the national, state and local levels. One example is the effort needed to promote and implement local Safe Routes to School Initiatives that make bicycling and walking to school a safer and more appealing transportation choice for families and students.15 At the federal level, reauthorization of the Surface Transportation Bill will help to support the Safe Routes to School Program. At the state level, Safe Routes to School Coalitions work to ensure that these initiatives are included in state nutrition and physical activity strategic plans, as well as plans developed to prevent chronic disease. Locally, organizations can collaborate to promote and implement initiatives throughout communities. Nonprofit organizations with multi-level infrastructure can work on key issues that can facilitate physical activity in a coordinated fashion at multiple levels.

Broad Base of Support

Recent data indicate that nearly 62 million individuals in the United States served as volunteers in 2007.16 In addition to a volunteer base, many nonprofits are member-based organizations or engage other types of constituencies. The changes in social and physical environments that will be needed to create new social norms and facilitate more physically active lifestyles will require many resources, including human resources, that can be leveraged to advocate for policy and environmental changes. The large number of people involved with nonprofit organizations is a tremendous resource, and engaging these individuals as change agents in efforts to promote physical activity is an important way for organizations to leverage their broad base of support. In addition, these supporters are an ideal and large audience to which nonprofits can communicate the important personal benefits of living a more physically active lifestyle.

Cross Sector Involvement

Many sectors are engaged in strategies to increase physical activity within their sphere of influence. For example, parks and recreation organizations work to increase funding for developing parks and recreation facilities across all neighborhoods; transportation and built envi-
orment organizations work to ensure communities have access to sidewalks and bike lanes; and those in the healthcare sector work to secure reimbursement for physical activity-related services. Although some nonprofit organizations work specifically within these sectors, many work across multiple sectors as well, making them desirable strategic partners for many different types of initiatives. For example, in its strategic plan to increase physical activity levels, a particular nonprofit may include advocating for physical education in schools and for increased funding to enhance infrastructure to support walking, bicycling and public transportation; leveraging of media resources to promote physically active lifestyles; and encouraging clinicians to query patients about their physical activity level at each visit.

**Outreach to a Variety of Populations and Systems**

Promoting physical activity and enhancing the ability of all Americans to live more physically active lives is important. Because of their specific goals and objectives, the work of many nonprofits is targeted to particular audiences, including youth, the elderly, racial/ethnic minority populations and/or health professionals, among others. In addition, nonprofits work through key systems, such as schools, worksites, healthcare, and the media. Efforts to engage these audiences and key systems in physical activity initiatives would benefit from the established trust, credibility, and existing relationships that nonprofit organizations would bring to the table. This may be especially valuable in outreach to underserved populations, who frequently experience significant community barriers to physical activity.5

**Collaborative in Nature**

Improving physical activity among all Americans will not be accomplished without effective collaboration among many different sectors. Past experience and current practice indicate that many nonprofit organizations can and do act as effective conveners of these key sectors. Many nonprofits recognize that the issues to which they are committed require extensive resources and are too large to address on their own. They also recognize that the power of multiple organizations coming together and speaking as “one voice” is more effective than attempting to work in isolation.

**Ability to Advocate**

Policy changes at the national, state and local levels that increase opportunities for all Americans to be more active will be critical to increase physical activity levels. Many nonprofits are uniquely positioned to influence decision makers at all levels on the importance of policies that affect physical activity; indeed, nonprofit organizations frequently are “out front” guiding public policy, educating decision makers to advance policies, and promoting legislation on a variety of issues. For entities that are not able to advocate and engage in legislative action, partnering with nonprofits that do have that capability can help advance policy priorities.

**Research Capabilities**

A variety of nonprofit organizations fund and/or conduct research that adds to the knowledge base on physical activity and health, identifies effective strategies to increase physical activity levels, and improves measurement and surveillance systems. In this regard, nonprofits can be valuable partners in many different types of research projects, collaborating with government, academia, industry and other entities. The infrastructure of many nonprofits also lends itself to serving as a “bench to trench” research laboratory, evaluating whether interventions can be applied effectively in “real world” settings.

**Recommendations for Action**

Nonprofit organizations have been key players in improving physical activity levels, and the development of a National Physical Activity Plan affords new opportunities to collaborate in creating a coordinated, comprehensive, sustainable physical activity movement throughout the United States. The following recommendations for action by nonprofit organizations are based on the unique roles nonprofits can play and build upon and complement the recommendations of other sectors. In some cases, these recommendations for nonprofits will involve implementation of specific recommendations of the other sectors involved in developing the National Plan.

**Advocacy**

Advocacy efforts by nonprofit organizations should focus on several types of policies: built environment policies that facilitate physical activity for all community members and that require increased dedicated walking and cycling facilities; school system policies that provide facilities for recreation and sport during and outside of school hours, require physical education, and include physical activity content in health education curricula; healthcare policies that provide reimbursement for physical activity assessment, counseling, programming and prescription; and federal fiscal policies that increase funding for physical activity research and evaluation, and/or reallocate funding that can facilitate physical activity (such as using a higher percentage of transportation funds to improve pedestrian and cycling infrastructure). Expanding, maintaining, and leveraging effective grassroots networks will be instrumental in establishing the policies needed to support lifelong physical activity for all Americans.
Strategic Collaborations

Nonprofits should establish and/or join forces with existing collaborations that increase capacity and build infrastructure to address physical activity, and that communicate the importance and benefits of a physically active lifestyle. Collaborations that reach high-risk populations (youth, the elderly, ethnic/racial minorities, low income populations) and that involve nontraditional partners are especially important. Nonprofit organizations with structures at multiple levels should work to facilitate integrated collaborations that support related national, state and local initiatives.

Nonprofits also should leverage industry relationships to support physical activity, such as encouraging the built environment industry to plan environments that facilitate physical activity; the physical activity industry to promote products that encourage physical activity by all people (not just athletes); and the entertainment industry to give higher priority to portraying physically active lifestyles. Nonprofits also can join forces with industry in advancing policies that increase physical activity opportunities.

Outreach to Membership/Volunteers/Constituents

Past public health movements have demonstrated that changing social norms is critical to achieving long-term behavior change. Because many nonprofit organizations have such a large membership/volunteer/constituent base, organizations should engage their supporters in this regard. In addition to communicating the benefits of physical activity and innovative ways to incorporate activity throughout the lifecycle, outreach strategies should include communication that empowers individuals to become advocates for change where they live, work, learn and play, so that ongoing opportunities for safe and enjoyable physical activity are increased.

Systems Change

Nonprofit organizations that work primarily through changing systems should emphasize resources designed to facilitate the adoption of physical activity-related policy and environmental changes in these systems. School administrators, employers, healthcare providers, neighborhood associations, and community leaders need tools to assess their environments for policies, strategies and programs that support or inhibit physical activity and that help to implement environmental changes that facilitate active lifestyles. Many nonprofits are strategically positioned to create, identify and/or disseminate evidenced-based tools to assist with these improvements. Schools need resources that help to increase physical activity throughout the school day and establish daily, quality physical education and other programs that promote activity, including programs for faculty and staff. Worksite resources should promote policies and benefit packages that use price and other incentives to encourage active commuting and regular activity and tools that promote environmental changes to make the worksite environment more “physical activity friendly.” Healthcare providers should be directed to resources that can assist them in communicating effectively with their patients about physical activity. Neighborhood and community leaders need assistance to identify components of the built environment that facilitate active living and transport, and tools to assess community design and infrastructure in regard to physical activity.

Strategic Communications

Ongoing communication is needed to promote both the benefits of regular physical activity and the steps schools, worksites, communities, and industry can take to facilitate more physically active lifestyles. Organizations should mobilize media partners in support of sustained physical activity by encouraging them to emphasize news, features, and campaigns designed to promote physical activity. Organizations should ensure that physical activity messages are integrated into disease prevention, health reform platforms, and other health promotion communication.

Research and Promotion

Nonprofit organizations that fund and/or conduct research should review their research portfolios and redirect funds, if possible, toward gaps in physical activity research funding. For nonprofits that do not fund research, their organizational structure and the real-world settings of their associations/chapters may lend themselves to an applied research setting. In this case, collaborating with academic, governmental and other research organizations is a valuable contribution to closing gaps in knowledge about promoting physical activity and disseminating evidenced-based information. Results of research findings should be communicated through the media and key stakeholders.

Conclusion

Given the compelling evidence that physically active lifestyles are related to reduced risk of many of the leading causes of death and other quality of life issues, and the fact that many Americans do not meet current physical activity recommendations, creating and sustaining environments that make it easier for all people to be physically active are important public health goals for the country. Nonprofit organizations at the national, state and local levels will need to work collaboratively across multiple sectors to advance policies, promote and facilitate innovative changes in schools, worksites and communities, and leverage their resources in efforts to help Americans become more active. In particular, these organizations can play key leadership roles in the areas
that tend to be unique core competencies: advocacy; convening and facilitating strategic collaborations; and reaching out to their membership, volunteer, and/or constituent bases to engage even more audiences in creating and sustaining an effective movement to improve physical activity levels among all Americans.

It has been said that creating social change requires the convergence of a number of factors: a crisis, a science base, “spark plugs;” coalition building, advocacy, government intervention, mass communication, policy and environmental changes, and a plan. With the development of the National Physical Activity Plan, partners across all sectors, including nonprofit organizations, are poised to be at the forefront of fundamental and important social change.

References

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