

Get Fit Itasca: Changing the Environment to Promote Active Living

Summary of Get Fit Itasca's Work Through the Active Living for All Initiative

In 2013, Get Fit Itasca was one of nine projects selected by the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (the Center) to receive funding through the Active Living for All (ALfA) initiative. All ALfA-funded organizations aimed to increase opportunities for physical activity in their community through policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes. With ALfA funding, Get Fit Itasca worked with Itasca Community College, and the cities of Grand Rapids and La Prairie to support improved biking and walking infrastructure that better connects the college and the surrounding community. The project also included implementation of a bike share program at the college and a Photovoice project with the students to identify barriers to active living on the campus and in the community. This summary describes Get Fit Itasca's work under ALfA from 2013-18 including their accomplishments, factors that contributed to their success, project challenges, and plans for the future.

Key accomplishments

Get Fit Itasca worked to create more opportunities and safer, more accessible environments to increase participation in active living activities. The initiative was aimed at residents of Grand Rapids and La Prairie as well as students at Itasca Community College (ICC). Their efforts contributed to changes in the physical environment, policies that support active living, and systems-level changes. The following is a summary of Get Fit Itasca's key accomplishments.

Implementing a community bike share program. A community bike share program was a both a pragmatic and idealistic idea that emerged in the Grand Rapids and broader Itasca County communities. The vision of the community bike share was to create a free program to address transportation issues in these communities. Through a partnership between Get Fit Itasca, the City of Grand Rapids, and the Rotary, the communities were able to realize this idea. The partnership wanted to address the transportation needs of low-income residents and give more people access to transportation for getting to work, the grocery store, or other places.

The program is free in Grand Rapids, and includes a total of 400 bright orange rental bikes equipped with odometers to track mileage. One unique element of the program is a partnership with local food shelves that encourages riding the bikes to the food shelves as a way to increase access to healthy foods. In addition, the bikes are equipped with baskets to allow for carrying food and other items. Community reaction to the bike share program has been positive. Representatives of different sectors, including business owners and government entities, residents, and tourists have made positive statements about the program and use the bikes. For example, one city administrator uses a bike to attend meetings around town. In addition to the Grand Rapids program, ICC launched a bike share program in consultation with Get Fit Itasca.

The bike share program is an area that has room to grow, not only within the City of Grand Rapids but also to other communities within Itasca County. Several organizations in the area, including Grand Itasca Hospital and Clinic, Grand Rapids Civic Center, and Essentia Health Deer River have requested a bike check out location on their property. . In 2017, the City of Grand Rapids agreed to be the official owner and fiscal agent of the community bike share program.

Programming at Itasca Community College (ICC). Get Fit Itasca built a partnership with ICC that led to multiple opportunities for students to be physically active, learn about bike safety and healthy eating, and describe their vision for a healthy campus through Photovoice, a participatory research approach used to engage community residents and decision-makers to document community strengths and problems and to identify solutions.

- **Bike share program.** In 2014, Get Fit Itasca built a bike shelter, bike racks, and a bike repair station on ICC's campus, and launched a bike share program. To help familiarize students with the program and with local bike routes near campus, Get Fit Itasca hosted a series of group bike rides. In addition, a Bike-In Movie event was held at the launch of the program, where about 60 students biked from campus to a local sports complex where a movie was shown. A pop-up bike lane was set up along the route to the complex. In spring 2015, the program held a campaign called "The Bikes are Back" to advertise that the bike share program was operating again after a winter hiatus. During the campaign, an average of 30 bikes per day were checked out from the bike share program. In 2015, Get Fit Itasca hosted a "ReVAMP our CAMPus" event during ICC's Global Education Week to talk about the importance of active transportation and active living in communities and to provide students with an orientation to tactical urbanism. Fifty people attended the event. In 2017, Get Fit Itasca handed over the responsibility of maintaining the program to the City of Grand Rapids, although they will remain a partner and advisor.
- **Photovoice.** In 2014, students in wellness classes at ICC participated in a Photovoice project, where they had the opportunity to take photos of barriers to staying healthy they encounter on campus. At the end of the semester, students were able to display some of the photos, and met with the Provost to discuss the problems they identified and ways they could be addressed. This resulted in ICC reviewing its campus vending policies and the establishment of a wellness

center, using existing space and supported by a small increase in student activities fees. The Photovoice projects were again incorporated into wellness classes in the 2014-2015 school year and three key needs arose: healthy cooking classes; instruction on using weight room equipment, especially for female students who might feel intimidated; and an updated recreation room in one of the dormitories. Get Fit Itasca continues to use Photovoice as a community engagement strategy with students to identify barriers to being healthy and to discuss solutions.

Revitalization of the Itasca Community Garden. Get Fit Itasca, in partnership with Grand Rapids, La Prairie and ICC revitalized a community garden on the University of Minnesota extension campus at ICC. Before ALfA, the space was underutilized, but with ALfA funding, the partnership helped to promote the garden, establish new garden plots, and implement other positive changes. Over time, the number of gardeners with plots has increased from 6 to 37, new plots have been added every year, and the garden has become a gathering space for members of the community to learn, enjoy nature, and create relationships with others. To make the space accessible to anyone in the community, the partnership was able to keep plot rates low or offer free plots. In addition, the community garden provides programming such as the Vegetable of the Year (in partnership with One Vegetable, One Community) to help people use the produce, and other free community events.

Creation of the Itasca Food Shelf Coalition.. In 2016, Get Fit Itasca's relationship with Second Harvest Food Shelf led to the creation of the Itasca Food Shelf Coalition, a group of food shelf organizations that discusses how to incorporate health into the individual food shelves in the area. The coalition has taken on activities such as offering a pop-up fresh produce market to distribute the excess fresh foods that are donated in the summer months, and participating in a training through the University of Minnesota extension called "Nudging towards Health," designed to help food shelf volunteers and staff learn ways to encourage clients to make healthier food choices.

Advocating for changes in bike infrastructure and policy. Get Fit Itasca was involved in multiple efforts to revise existing policy and infrastructure to promote active living.

- **Bikes, trails and traffic policy, and infrastructure.** In partnership with the City of Grand Rapids, Visit Grand Rapids, the YMCA, ICC, and residents, Get Fit Itasca developed a pilot project to show the community how Fifth Street, just one block away from a major thoroughfare where many business are located, could be better utilized as a two-lane road with a center turn lane, bike lanes, and parking as opposed to four lanes and parking. In June 2014, temporary bike lanes were added. Based on an evaluation of the temporary bike lanes, Get Fit Itasca worked with the city engineer to determine the best model for permanent bike lanes, which were added in 2016. Get Fit Itasca also created and installed wayfinding signs in multiple places in the city, including at ICC.

Additional changes supported biking in other parts of the county, as well. La Prairie approved the construction of an eight-foot wide multi-use trail on the Balsam Street right-of-way west of La Prairie Avenue and Fraser Street between La Prairie Avenue and Voges Avenue. In the end, the City of La Prairie built a 12-foot wide multi-use trail that connects two major highways (US Highway 2 with US Highway 169). Get Fit Itasca also supported the development of an app called “Itasca Bikes,” which is a one-stop shop for beginner bikers and a resource for finding trails and bike routes. Finally, the City of La Prairie Comprehensive Plan, written by Arrowhead Regional Development Commission, reflected the priorities that emerged through multiple community engagement efforts and included very strong bicycle/pedestrian infrastructure language.

- **Soliciting community input on infrastructure and policies.** Get Fit Itasca organized multiple discussions to solicit community input on city policies and decisions. One such activity was a roundtable discussion about incorporating walkability and bikeability into plans and policies with La Prairie elected officials, city and county transportation staff, and Arrowhead Regional Development staff. Another included working with the ICC Engineering Department to incorporate curriculum on non-motorized infrastructure planning and use in its courses.

Factors that contributed to success

Ensuring sustainability of efforts through strategic partnerships. Get Fit Itasca relied on its partnerships to move the work forward. A partnership with the community leadership team established through the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) enabled community partners to become part of the team. Another partnership with Second Harvest Food Shelf led to the formation of the Itasca Food Shelf Coalition. Such coalitions and partnerships enabled Get Fit Itasca to rely on the strengths of their partners when ALfA resources alone were not enough to address a need. In addition, these relationships allowed Get Fit Itasca to think about sustainability moving forward, and to address staffing transitions and gaps.

Using community engagement strategies. During the ALfA initiative, Get Fit Itasca used community engagement strategies to learn what the community needed, gather input on policies and activities, and advertise active living offerings. For example, before beginning their active living programming at ICC, Get Fit Itasca engaged faculty and staff at the Itasca Community College Staff Duty Days to participate in a wellness committee. Other examples of community engagement activities included hosting events such as the La Prairie Proud Picnic, which brought together community members to discuss making the community safe for active living transportation, supporting the ICC Photovoice process, and holding one-to-one conversations. Get Fit Itasca also used mailers and posts on social media as community outreach strategies to inform community members about upcoming events.

Challenges and lessons learned

Resist making assumptions about community needs. One lesson Get Fit Itasca emphasized was not to assume they knew what was best for the community or had exactly the right resources to address community needs. Rather, they learned it is important to get to know the community, where their strengths and assets are, and how everyone can work together to creatively solve problems.

Ongoing relationship building is essential, particularly after changes in leadership. Throughout the ALfA initiative, there were multiple leadership changes in the city government, within their fiscal agency the YMCA, and within Get Fit Itasca. Bringing new people up to speed on the partnership's work was not always easy. Get Fit Itasca staff and all of their partners needed clear lines of communication between them to ensure that everyone involved had a shared understanding of the work. This strong partnership also helped the work continue during changes in Get Fit Itasca's leadership in 2017 and 2018.

Moving forward

As the ALfA initiative winds down, Get Fit Itasca has plans for continuing their work in active living. Get Fit Itasca is meeting with all their partners to understand their capacity and willingness to continue the work. Through these meetings, they are working on establishing new goals and expectations, rather than assuming each partner will continue. Engaging in this work requires Get Fit Itasca to be flexible and open to their partners' needs and capacities.

Get Fit Itasca does not have a source of funding to replace what they had allocated for active living activities through ALfA, but will continue to use SHIP funds as much as possible. This will include continuing active living work in non-ALfA funded communities, implementing strategies using a Health in All Policies framework, and ensuring equity is a grounding principle across all of the work.

Get Fit Itasca will continue to grapple with how to best prioritize work with limited staff. Although SHIP funding will continue to support some of the active living work, it will be more difficult to focus explicitly on this area without the same staff time and financial resources available. Continuing to support the partnerships formed during the ALfA initiative is a priority for Get Fit Itasca and may lead to new ways of ensuring the work moves forward.



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