

Move Minnesota: Engaging Community Members as Leaders in Promoting Walking and Biking

Summary of Work Completed Through the Active Living for All initiative

In 2013, two initiatives through Saint Paul Smart Trips (Smart Trips) received funding from the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (the Center) through the Active Living for All (ALfA) initiative. All nine ALfA-funded projects aimed to increase opportunities for physical activity in their community through policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes.

Before ALfA funding, Smart Trips had an established Neighborhoods program in several other Saint Paul neighborhoods, including Highland Park, Union Park, and Summit-University. These programs focused on increasing active living and mobilizing advocates through classes, events, and workshops. The programs were engaging a more white and affluent group of participants, which Smart Trips recognized did not accurately reflect the diversity of residents in Saint Paul. In 2012, the program began a partnership with the Kitty Anderson Youth Science Center (KAYSC), located in the Science Museum of Minnesota, to bring the program to the Frogtown neighborhood to engage a broader demographic of Saint Paul residents, including communities of color and youth. ALfA funding allowed Smart Trips to expand its work with KAYSC. Working with a group of high school students from Frogtown (the Frogtown Crew), they developed an outreach campaign to promote walking and biking in Frogtown through activities such as block parties, door-knocking, bike rides, and other community events. In 2016, Smart Trips began working in District 1, on the East Side of Saint Paul, as the next phase of the Neighborhoods Program to better understand and address transportation barriers in the community.

Through ALfA funding, Smart Trips also launched the Women on Bikes program (WOB). Women on Bikes was established to increase safe and connected bicycle infrastructure and to strengthen the numbers of women biking in Saint Paul. WOB sought to build its coalition of women advocating for improved bicycle facilities, including its “Spokeswomen” model, a group of women representing each ward to serve as leaders and advocates in promoting active living.

In the first three years of ALfA funding, the two programs were led largely independently with little overlap in staffing or coordination of activities. Both projects have evolved over the course of the five-year initiative and have increasingly integrated their work. Near the end of 2015, Smart Trips began to conclude some of its work in Frogtown, including its partnership with KAYSC. Over the course of the initiative, WOB used multiple strategies to engage a more diverse group of women in its education and advocacy efforts. Beginning in 2016, Smart Trips staff began to consider ways to better integrate the two programs and identified opportunities to collaborate as the geographic focus shifted to District 1 on the East Side. In 2017, Smart Trips merged with Transit for Livable Communities (TLC) to become TLC-Smart Trips, later rebranded as Move Minnesota. This summary describes the two programs' work under ALfA during the past five years, including their accomplishments, factors that contributed to their success, project challenges, and plans for the future.

Key accomplishments

Neighborhoods program

Frogtown

The Frogtown Crew grew out of Smart Trips' interest in expanding the Neighborhoods program to Frogtown to include a broader demographic of Saint Paul residents, including communities of color and youth. The partnership with KAYSC provided an opportunity to build on KAYSC's experience with out-of-school programming focused on leadership and career development, and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skill-building.

Developing a youth-led campaign to promote active transportation in Frogtown. In 2012, the partners launched the Frogtown Crew, involving high school students from the Frogtown neighborhood of Saint Paul with a series of youth development and educational activities around transportation.¹ Beginning in 2014, the youth held a community discussion, surveyed residents through door-knocking about barriers to walking and biking, and held a series of nine block parties to promote the use of active transportation and build community. As part of these efforts, the youth developed a mission statement (“to awaken and educate the minds of Frogtown through arts and outreach on sustainable transportation while staying rooted in the community”) and logo. They also created a “Mic on a Trike,” a portable stereo and speakers built into a tricycle that could be used at the block parties. Over 1,000 community members attended the block parties, and youth collected 193 surveys through their door-knocking efforts.

¹ The first year of work with the Frogtown Crew was funded through Bike Walk Twin Cities before Smart Trips received ALfA funding in 2013 to expand its partnership with KAYSC and its youth development work.

In 2015, the Frogtown Crew grew to 14 members, with some new and some returning members. Building on their work from the previous year, the youth held a series of five group bike rides, called the Unity Bike Rides, to promote biking in their neighborhood. Crew members had participants fill out surveys at the beginning of each ride and sign a pledge to make one change in the next week related to biking. Crew members did follow-up phone surveys with participants about the impact of the ride pledge. A total of 28 people attended the rides, including several city councilmembers. The final ride ended with a community celebration of a street mural the youth had created with a local artist, with over 50 people in attendance.

Bringing youth voice to planning processes. Frogtown Crew members have also served on the board of the Frogtown Neighborhood Association (FNA). Three crewmembers served on the board in 2014, and one member served in 2015 and 2016, providing input into the [small area plan](#) and other local matters.

District 1

Beginning in 2016, the newly merged TLC-Smart Trips began to move into work in District 1 of Saint Paul for the next iteration of the Neighborhoods program.

Continuing to engage youth as leaders. While no longer working directly with KAYSC, TLC-Smart Trips remained committed to engaging youth in its work, hiring former Frogtown Crew members as interns through a newly designed Youth Initiative. Smart Trips also hired a young adult who was a former member to supervise the program. The interns' early efforts focused on work they had begun in Frogtown, including designing outreach efforts to gather youth input to inform FNA's small area plan and Metro Transit's Better Bus Stops program. These efforts included hosting and attending community events and collecting surveys from 200 people, 50 percent of which were from youth under 25.

Building relationships to understand community needs and support active transportation. Smart Trips began its East Side work by engaging key stakeholders and residents to better understand transportation needs. The organization held a number of one-on-one discussions with organizations and leaders in the community, and scheduled four community meetings at apartment complexes, reaching over 75 residents, to discuss transportation issues. Youth Initiative interns also attended or hosted a variety of community events to engage youth and adults in District 1. Other outreach strategies included Slow Roll bike rides and placing informational pamphlets about transit options at five locations in the community.

Women on Bikes

Building a coalition of women to advocate for safe bicycle facilities in Saint Paul. WOB staff and founding members were already well connected to local decision-makers, but were able to expand their capacity for advocacy through ALfA funding. A central part of this work was the Spokeswomen program. In the first three years of work, WOB built its coalition of Spokeswomen to 20 members. The Spokeswomen organized women in their neighborhoods to bike more often and become involved in advocacy efforts. Many Spokeswomen also became more active advocates themselves, by attending meetings and speaking to city council members about improved bicycle facilities.

WOB also hosted events and implemented communications strategies to build a broader base of supporters and advocates. WOB offered a series of Bikes Mean Business Happy Hours at local bars and restaurants to demonstrate to business owners that the bike community is a potential customer base that they can cater to through improved bike facilities such as bike racks and by supporting local infrastructure projects.

WOB also developed smaller-scale efforts to support women biking, including family-friendly rides, Slow Roll bike rides, and classes to address some of the barriers to biking identified by women and increase their confidence.

Supporting the passage of the Saint Paul Bicycle Plan to create a safer, more connected network of bicycle facilities. WOB played an important role engaging residents and advocating for improvements to the proposed Saint Paul Bicycle Plan that would help eliminate gaps in biking infrastructure and encourage biking in Saint Paul. They have been able to send out timely action alerts and other communication and also provided advocacy training to help women be more effective testifying and relaying their key recommendations. Because of these and other efforts to build a base of advocates, approximately 200 residents attended the final City Council vote on the plan, and 20 residents and business owners provided testimony. The final plan incorporates many of the suggestions offered by WOB, including an increase in protected bike lanes. The bike plan also gave WOB an opportunity to engage women in all Saint Paul wards in advocacy on a single issue, rather than on bike infrastructure or safety concerns that are highly localized.

After the Saint Paul Bicycle Plan was passed, WOB worked with decision-makers to monitor and support its implementation. Specific areas of focus included the Capital City Bikeway in downtown Saint Paul, Pelham Boulevard, Saint Anthony Avenue, and Hamline Avenue. WOB has also advocated for more accurate bike counts to better understand how often women and families are biking in Saint Paul. This information will help them further influence implementation of the Saint Paul Bicycle Plan and Complete Streets Plan and assess its impact.

Move Minnesota coordinated efforts

Bringing together the Neighborhoods program and WOB to support active transportation in District 1. As the merged organizations underwent strategic planning efforts in their final years of work, the Neighborhoods program and WOB increasingly brought together their efforts to engage community members, build a base of support, and advocate for improvements to infrastructure and services in District 1. Key engagement efforts included bike rides and community events, especially along routes or in areas that were the focus of the programs' advocacy efforts, Slow Roll bike rides, bike marshal trainings, and happy hours. Interns from the Youth Initiative continued to be involved in supporting and planning outreach activities at these events.

Move Minnesota also continued to build the capacity of community members to advocate for changes. The organization coached several District 1 residents to testify at the final public hearing for bicycle and pedestrian improvements along Margaret Street in Saint Paul. The plan passed unanimously with strong community support at the City Council hearing. The organization has also involved decision-makers in attending or speaking at different engagement events, including a Transportation Tuesday happy hour, monthly advocacy rides during warm weather months, and community bike rides for Bike to Work Day.

Factors that contributed to success

Engaging residents as leaders helped build new champions and engage communities differently. Much of Move Minnesota's work through the ALfA initiative focused on activating new leaders, particularly youth and women. Project stakeholders reflected how working with these two groups in turn influenced their work.

Project stakeholders shared that working with youth through the Frogtown Crew and later the Youth Initiative challenged their more traditional ways of doing outreach. The interns questioned how survey items were phrased based on what they were hearing and how young people might respond, suggested places to reach youth and adults in their neighborhood, and came up with new ways of engaging people through block parties, bike rides, and other activities. The youth were able to reach a broader audience by talking to peers and adults who were more receptive to listening to young people. The interns also influenced how Move Minnesota operated internally, building in more team-building activities, and partnering with a researcher from Wilder Research to develop a set of recommendations for how Move Minnesota could better support young people within the organization. The interns' recommendations included offering more professional development opportunities, providing more opportunities for staff and interns to interact, hiring more staff of color, expanding the intern program, and providing training for staff on how to work with young people.

Working with youth really changed our approach to gathering input, in terms of phrasing survey questions, how we do in-person engagement, where we go, and who we're working with. We are using a lot of those networks and suggestions they're giving us, which is beneficial as an organizer.

–Move Minnesota staff

Young people are just as capable with engagement work to inform the type of things we want to do. That's the future of what we're doing now... We see what we're striving for because it's here right now in front of us.

–Move Minnesota staff

Likewise, the Spokeswomen helped to expand the organization's reach into different wards and were critical in turning out people in favor of the Saint Paul Bicycle Plan. Project stakeholders reflected on how both the youth and women were able to engage decision-makers in new ways. Youth were able to offer an important voice as future users of the transportation systems currently being designed. Likewise, WOB noted that the women who attended the city council meetings were able to talk about the safety concerns they had when biking alone or with kids, and how these could be addressed with changes in bicycle infrastructure.

Spending extended time in communities built trust and knowledge of community concerns.

Move Minnesota spent over two years in each of the communities it worked in during the funding period, and project stakeholders reflected how important having time to build relationships was to their work. Similarly, WOB maintained their work with Spokeswomen in each ward, both individually, and as a group of advocates. Being able to do so was facilitated by both the five-year funding and support for doing this foundational work from Blue Cross.

And as an organizer, it's very beneficial to have extended time to do this work because you get to work with community and build more relationships instead of having transactional relationships. Many times it is a three month process. You go in and then the community never hears back from you. This was a great opportunity for us to be present with them.

–Move Minnesota staff

Expanding the conversation around transportation helped to meet communities where they were.

Project stakeholders described meeting communities where they are as both a challenge and an opportunity. In their District 1 work in particular, project stakeholders found that mobility was not necessarily the top priority for residents. Organizers worked to open up the conversation to other topics that were of interest, including housing and jobs, and how mobility may play a role in those issues. Likewise, the organization expanded its outreach approach to increasingly focus on strategies that would connect with the communities they were serving, rather than using more traditional outreach methods. These included the block parties and Unity bike rides in the earlier years of their work. Later in their work, it also included Slow Rolls and bringing decision-makers to the community, rather than having Spokeswomen and other residents attend public meetings.

When I started my goal was to identify transportation barriers. Going into the community and saying let's talk about transportation. It wasn't a topic that clicked right away. I had to figure out how to make transportation relevant. How does it relate to housing, job access, and how intersection can play a role.

–Move Minnesota staff

Challenges and lessons learned

Smart Trips and KAYSC encountered some challenges aligning goals across their different focus areas. Project stakeholders noted some growing pains in their partnership with KAYSC based on the differing goals of each partner. KAYSC's main focus was on youth development, whereas Smart Trips' emphasis was on community outreach. Although there was overlap in these goals, the differing priorities created some tensions as the two partners worked together. Smart Trips staff reflected that they learned to slow down to support the growth and needs of the young people they were working with. They also emphasized the importance of regular and open communication between the partners to address differences in approach.

WOB faced some difficulties engaging Spokeswomen who reflect the communities they represent. Although WOB recruited women as Spokeswomen across all the Saint Paul wards, they struggled throughout the initiative to engage a broader diversity of women reflecting the cultural and socioeconomic diversity of Saint Paul residents. As Move Minnesota has taken more intentional steps to center equity, WOB is continuing its work to ensure that they are elevating the priorities and concerns of residents who may be most impacted by key decisions, but often have the least voice in the decision-making process.

The two programs worked to keep momentum while managing organizational transitions. In 2017, Smart Trips merged with TLC to become TLC-Smart Trips, and later Move Minnesota. This merger resulted in new office space and several staff transitions. Although staff on the Neighborhoods program and WOB remained largely consistent, the merger put strains on these staff, who often had to take on other roles and efforts within the organization. As the new organization undertook a strategic planning process, project staff faced some uncertainty in how to direct their efforts and how the current programs would fit into the organization's long-term vision. The merger also presented opportunities to join TLC's traditional focus on local and state policy with Smart Trips' community-based approach.

The Neighborhoods program sometimes had to balance organizational and community priorities. In Move Minnesota's work in District 1, they noted that often times, residents they engaged with wanted to talk about other issues beyond transportation. They also found that residents did not think of their community in terms of geography, but rather through cultural ties that may span neighborhood and city boundaries, which challenged the organization to revisit how they framed the Neighborhoods program. Project staff worked to be attentive to what they were hearing and expanded their approach to reflect the intersection of issues such as housing, jobs, and transportation. However, they noted that it was sometimes still a struggle to balance the priorities of the organization with the interests of community members.

It was really difficult having transportation be the sole conversation. I'm still trying to figure out how to meet the goals of the organization while meeting [the residents] where they're at.

–Move Minnesota staff

The Neighborhoods program worked to stay engaged in communities over time while also moving into new neighborhoods. As the organization shifted its focus to District 1, project stakeholders tried to continue some efforts they had begun in Frogtown, such as continued work with the Frogtown Neighborhood Association, but they also received feedback about their absence. Within their limited capacity, project stakeholders struggled to stay engaged in Frogtown. They reflected on the importance of having a continued presence in communities even when a key campaign is finished but also being clear in what they can offer.

Knowing that some of our work has pivoted this year towards the East Side, some groups in Frogtown were like, "Where the hell were you guys?" We only have so many staffers; we have to try to give communities as much as we can when we can. A lot of the community groups that were frustrated with us are local community groups. We have done hyper-localized organizing which seems to work when you're trying to engage people around transportation, but then when you leave those hyper-local organizations are still there. So setting those expectations is important. —Move Minnesota staff

Moving forward

In June 2018, TLC-Smart Trips launched its new identity as Move Minnesota, with the mission statement that "Move Minnesota leads the movement for an equitable transportation system that puts people first." The new organization will be broadening its focus to efforts across the state, while continuing to focus on advocacy, community engagement, and education. The organization is also investing in internal trainings and development focused on equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The Neighborhoods program and WOB will continue to do community engagement around specific projects, including several east metro corridors and through some partnerships with public agencies. The programs plan to continue community bike rides such as Slow Roll bike rides because of their success in engaging residents.

Staff reflected that the organization's Neighborhoods Program work through ALfA set the tone for how they want to do organizing and relationship-building moving forward. They have been able to build on the relationships they built during ALfA to plan future work. They are also prioritizing projects that focus on longer-term relationship-building rather than more transactional work in communities.

Long-term, the two programs will prioritize projects that may have the greatest impact on equity. For example, Move MN is pausing the Spokeswoman program because the previous model did not engage women reflecting the cultural and socioeconomic diversity of Saint Paul residents. Move MN will be holding strategic planning discussions to clarify how to integrate components of WOB's education, engagement, and advocacy model into its work moving forward.

Move Minnesota continues to be interested in working with young people, but the Youth Initiative has currently been put on hold as staff consider how they can best involve youth in the new organization moving forward.



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