

People Powered Improvements: How Advocates Can Support the Implementation of Safe Routes to Parks



Photo credit: Blue Zones Hawaii

Community advocates can help bring plans to life. While there are countless ways that neighbors and residents can help to improve safe, equitable park access, this fact sheet provides four examples of how community advocates can participate in the implementation of Safe Routes to Parks efforts and highlights stories of advocates using these strategies.

Depending on the type of implementation activity, Safe Routes to Parks advocates can serve in a supportive or leading role to help make tangible improvements to park access in their community. Who takes the lead in a given effort typically depends upon the type of implementation strategy area; for example, engineering and design efforts are often led by a parks agency or local government, whereas programming can be facilitated by a community-based organization. Neighbors and residents can help make a difference on the ground by advocating for desired changes, helping to raise money, volunteering their time and energy, and helping to evaluate the impact of Safe Routes to Parks improvements.

In the context of Safe Routes to Parks, implementation means putting plans into action and ensuring that those actions are based on best practices in engineering, design, and programming.

Advocate for the Change You Want to See

People interested in improving access to high-quality local parks likely have long wish lists of improvements they would like to see, both to the amenities in parks and the routes people travel to get to them. Since money is a finite resource for most communities, the desires typically need to be prioritized and advocated for. Community residents can be tremendously effective at advocating to elected and appointed officials for the improvements they want to see in their neighborhoods. To support the implementation of Safe Routes to Parks efforts, advocates can contact local elected and appointed officials to share their views, testify at city council meetings, write op-eds in the local newspaper, and share photos of local conditions in and along routes to parks.

- ❖ The Shawnee Family YMCA of Shawnee, Oklahoma organized a group of youth and city residents to ride their bikes to a city commissioners meeting to testify in support of Safe Routes to Parks, Safe Routes to School, and the need for safer streets for riding bikes in Shawnee.



Create community piggy banks

Funding is often a limiting factor for making Safe Routes to Parks-related improvements. One way that community advocates can support the implementation of Safe Routes to Parks activities is through fundraising. Fundraising can involve one-time events, like a picnic at the park where raffle tickets are sold, or can involve membership in a Friends of Park organization that provides ongoing support to a particular park. While it is unreasonable to expect that hosting community fundraising activities can raise enough money to build costly infrastructure improvements like new sidewalks, community fundraisers can support smaller efforts, such as buying paint to freshen up a sign or purchasing trash bags and gloves to host a community park cleanup day.

- ❖ Shawano Pathways hosts annual fundraisers to raise money to support its programs and work, including raising money to purchase materials to maintain bridges and trails that connect local parks as part of the area's Park to Park loops. Shawano Pathways' signature fundraisers include a Barn Dance and the Bike the Barn Quilts Ride, an event offering five to 70 mile bike routes through scenic Shawano County, Wisconsin. In addition to raising funds, these hallmark events also build community.

Provide hands-on support in building, maintenance, or activation activities

Safe Routes to Parks advocates can help organize volunteers to build or maintain facilities that support walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation. They can also actively participate in building, maintaining, or activating a space, which can help to add capacity where there is limited local government staff. Active participation from residents can encourage community ownership of the improvement, which can persuade folks to use

the facility and keep it clean. Community organizations can also identify groups or individuals to host events that bring attention to and engage people in the changed environment. Groups or individuals in the neighborhood often have a better understanding of the cultural interests of residents; therefore, it can be helpful to partner to develop activities that will showcase the improvements to the environment and engage folks in using it. Depending upon time and resources, Safe Routes to Parks advocates can offer hands-on support in a number of ways.

- ❖ In Honolulu, Hawaii, Blue Zones Hawaii recruited neighbors from the Mo'ili'ili neighborhood, AARP members, middle school students, members of the Hawaii Bicycling League, local businesses, local law enforcement partners, and other neighborhood stakeholders to paint an intersection mural at the entrance to Old Stadium Park. This intersection mural brightens up curb bulb-outs installed in the intersection and makes the entrance to the park more aesthetically pleasing.



Photo credit: Blue Zones Hawaii

Evaluate the impact

One way for community advocates to support the implementation of Safe Routes to Parks efforts is through evaluating the impact of a given improvement. Evaluation helps assess the impact and effectiveness of an effort. The information gathered from evaluation activities can be used to show impact, make the case to local governments and funders for future investments, and generate further interest in advancing Safe Routes to Parks. Check out the [Safe Routes to Parks Evaluation Guide: Steps and Tips to Assess and Inform Efforts to Improve Park Access](#) for more details on how to use assessment and evaluation to improve park access in your community. In practice, many communities pat themselves on the back following the repainting of a crosswalk or restriping a bike lane (as they should!), but there's an opportunity to go the extra mile by comparing the number of people using the crosswalk to earlier counts. Evaluation activities are also a great way to ensure that the solutions to improve park access address the needs of the community.

- ❖ In Wenatchee, Washington, members of the United Neighborhood Association for South Wenatchee identified the fact that cars do not stop at stop signs as a reason they did not feel safe walking to their neighborhood park, Kiwanis Matthews Park. As part of the Assessment phase of their Safe Routes to Parks work, community residents conducted intersection observations to count the number of cars that came to complete stops at stop signs. Of the 91 cars they observed over the course of an hour, a full 78 of them did not come to a complete stop at the stop signs. Community residents and stakeholders identified flashing LED lights at the stop signs as a priority to improve safety for people walking around this intersection and worked with the city to have them installed. Following the installation of the LED flashing stop signs, 115 cars were observed and 86 cars came to a complete stop; a dramatic improvement from before the LED flashing lights were installed.

Ordinary people can help make an extraordinary difference. By lending their time, energy, and enthusiasm, community advocates and residents can help make real improvements to park access in their communities.

