



Five Ways to Create an Inclusive, Equitable Safe Routes to Parks Initiative

Rain is usually a welcome occurrence in California’s Central Valley, but not for the kids living near Rexland Acres Park in Greenfield, California. In this family-centric, low-income neighborhood, many kids walk to Rexland Acres or walk past the park on their way to the nearby elementary school. However, the community doesn’t have sidewalks, and the streets are lined with hard dirt without any drainage.

“Cars will come by and splash [kids], so [they] can’t walk through the intersection without being soaked,” says Yolanda Alcantar of Kent County Public Works Department. “They’d arrive at school soaking wet, and their parents would have to come get them or bring a change of clothes.” As a result, parents ended up driving their kids to the park or to school, even if it was just a few blocks. That’s when Greenfield Walking Group, a nonprofit, volunteer-run organization, got involved to kick-start Safe Routes to Parks initiatives to improve access for people walking and biking to and around the park.

Everyone deserves safe, easy access to parks, but low-income communities and communities of color are often overlooked when it comes to investing in park maintenance and access. Safe Routes to Parks is especially important in communities that lack infrastructure, such as sidewalks, crosswalks and speed humps, to support safe walking and bicycling; where violence and crime are prevalent; and where there are high rates of weight-related diseases or conditions. Improving safe park access requires thoughtful assessment and inclusion of strategies aimed at overcoming these injustices in each stage of a community’s Safe Routes to Parks efforts.

Through the Safe Routes Partnership’s Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities program, a cohort of 10 to 12 nonprofits from across the country are working to improve safe and equitable park access in their communities. The grantees follow the Safe Routes to Parks framework, which was co-developed by NRPA and the Safe Routes Partnership in 2016. From its inception, this program has focused on advancing equity through improved park access. The goal of its grant funding and technical assistance is to secure park access for people of all ages and abilities in low-income communities and communities of color.

The “[Equity in Safe Routes to Parks](#)” series includes five fact sheets that can help ensure that all community members have access to safe, high-quality parks. Each fact sheet highlights equity in a specific stage of the Safe Routes to Parks Action Framework: Engagement, Planning, Implementation, Sustainability and Assessment.



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Equity in Engagement: The Core of Equitable Safe Routes to Parks Efforts

Meaningful community engagement will inform and guide each phase of Safe Routes to Parks, ensuring that a community's priorities are reflected in the work and in the results. Authentic engagement is more than simply hosting a one-time meeting or event to gather feedback. In addition to inviting community members to regularly contribute throughout the Safe Routes to Parks process, broaden your coalition by meeting neighborhood residents where they are. Show up and support efforts and events organized by other community partners and ask how to make it as easy as possible for residents to participate in Safe Routes to Parks. Make sure to engage all kinds of residents, including youth, seniors, non-English speakers, people of color, people who identify as LGBTQ and people with disabilities, in all phases of Safe Routes to Parks.

In action: Zyp Bikeshare in Birmingham, Alabama [engaged neighborhood residents](#) in a pop-up project to build support for better biking connections to a local park.

Many Birmingham residents – especially people of color, women, seniors and low-income individuals – are among those who could benefit most from the health and community advantages of being able to walk or bike to a local park. They are also the least likely to ride bikes. Bikeshare programs, like Zyp, can be effective at introducing bicycling to new riders and people who don't get enough exercise, but, first, they have to overcome the barrier of the stigma.

When Zyp Bikeshare became a Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities program grantee in 2018 it already had three years of community engagement experience with the residents of Birmingham. It had conducted more than 40 outreach events and multiple surveys to try to understand why residents weren't using the bikeshare. These existing relationships within the community laid the groundwork for a working relationship built on trust and two-way dialogue about how bikeshare and bike facilities could enhance neighborhoods and improve residents' lifestyles.

Zyp needed to show residents how it would feel, and how easy it would be, to bike to Memorial Park on a street with bike lanes. So, rather than invite the community to another neighborhood meeting, the company gave residents a hands-on demonstration of what biking in the neighborhood would be like with [Complete Streets](#) and bike lanes by installing a temporary pop-up bike lane on Center Street from Smithfield to Memorial Park.

In August 2018, Zyp staff, using street chalk and spray paint, painted a temporary bike lane on Center Street leading to Memorial Park. They invited residents to come out, ride bikeshare for free in the temporary lanes and talk about their experiences and desires for biking in the neighborhood.



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Rather than publicize the event to the wider Birmingham, Zyp limited promotion of the event to the Smithfield and Titusville neighborhoods. It was much more important to make meaningful connections with neighborhood residents than create the impression of a widely attended event.

The pop-up project was an undeniable success. The city of Birmingham is now moving forward with a plan to stripe permanent bike lanes on Center Street from Smithfield to Memorial Park.

Equity in Assessment: Understanding Barriers and Opportunities to Improve Safe Park Access

Assessing the challenges and potential solutions to improving park access is usually among the first phases of a Safe Routes to Parks project. Involve community members in the discussion from the very beginning. Neighbors have lived experience, inside information and local knowledge about how parks are currently being used (or not) and what needs to be done to make them enjoyable, safe places to spend time. While walk audits and data collection and analysis can help identify barriers to safe park access, equitable assessment activities should also include listening to neighbors, asking questions and relaying information to the community through a credible messenger.

In action: Read about how CAN DO Houston worked with residents in the Near Northside neighborhood to [assess and identify solutions](#) to improve walkability to local parks.

With a grant and technical assistance from the 2018 Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities Program, CAN DO Houston worked with residents to assess walkability and implement street safety enhancements focused on improving park access at Castillo Park and the surrounding areas in the Near Northside community. Resident advocates who had been trained in CAN DO Houston's Community Leadership and Advocacy Training worked with neighbors and led collaborative efforts to identify priority routes, conduct and analyze walkability and safety assessments and make recommendations to local community organizations and the city of Houston through the mayor's Complete Communities Initiative.

These community-led assessments yielded agreement on an improvement that could catalyze further interest and momentum in improving walkability around Castillo Park/the Near Northside Neighborhood: improving safety at three intersections near Castillo Park and the Marshall Middle Academy of Fine Arts. One of the primary concerns for residents was that drivers did not notice crosswalks and often did not stop for people waiting to cross the street. To make the crosswalks more visible and noticeable, youth, residents and partner organizations created a temporary pop-up crosswalk using acrylic paint to showcase art designed by students from two schools located near the park.



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The strong community interest in this project prompted the Public Works Department to reinstall a missing stop sign and add pavement paint to bring attention to the stop sign. The city also has plans for additional future improvements, including removing the current crosswalks to create permanent artwork crosswalks.

Equity in Planning: Charting a Path Toward Safer Park Access

The planning phase of Safe Routes to Parks is an opportunity to formalize language in plans and policies that prioritizes action and investments in communities that need the most support. Planning for Safe Routes to Parks can include supporting the creation or updating of existing transportation-, planning-, or parks-related policies, plans and programs with Safe Routes to Parks community-identified priorities, and determining future investments to improve safe and equitable access to parks in communities that need the most support. Data analysis plays an important role in determining which parks and neighborhoods have the highest need; an analysis of Safe Routes to Parks-related community needs should drive Safe Routes to Parks priorities and investments.

In action: Read about how Cultiva La Salud developed a [Safe Routes to Parks Improvement Plan](#) that outlined the barriers and obstacles that prevented residents from walking to and from the park and the essential elements of a safe park and neighborhood.

In collaboration with residents, community organizations, nonprofits, and county and municipal agencies, Cultiva La Salud developed a Safe Routes to Parks Improvement Plan that outlined the barriers and obstacles that prevented residents from walking to and from the park and the essential elements of a safe park and neighborhood. The plan will guide advocacy efforts and hold stakeholders accountable for the improvements identified as priorities. With the Safe Routes to Parks grant, Cultiva La Salud was able to bring in a landscape architect to help create a dream park plan, and more importantly, put price tags on each element. After the wish list was completed and costs were identified, everyone agreed to start with enhancements that would immediately improve the park, even if they were on a smaller scale. Merced County is now working to secure state funding to make these park improvements.

Equity in Implementation: Putting Plans into Action to Improve Safe Routes to Parks

By this stage, community members will have been involved in each phase of the Safe Routes to Parks process. They should continue to be included in carrying out the plans they helped to develop. Some ways to involve them in implementation include



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inviting local artists to help design wayfinding signage or park artwork, collaborating with neighbors on park programming and event ideas that are culturally relevant and showcase the community's involvement in park improvements, and inviting residents to help evaluate and collect data on how people are using the park after changes have been made.

In action: Watch a video about how [Living Cully Walks](#) worked with community residents and artists to create a wayfinding network that helps people get to Cully Park, which was built on a former landfill in the Cully neighborhood of Portland.

In the Cully neighborhood of Portland, Oregon, Verde, a 2018 Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities program grantee, engaged community residents to design a wayfinding system connecting people to parks in their neighborhood. This system maps out the locations of neighborhood parks and the safe routes to get to them, as identified by community residents. Residents worked with local artists to design the art and signage for the wayfinding system. The wayfinding system incorporates maps, signs and community art that resonate with and are designed by the predominantly Latinx and Native American populations of this neighborhood.

Keep the Good Work Going: How to Sustain Your Equitable Safe Routes to Parks Efforts

Funding comes and goes, but community residents' need for safe, secure park access continues beyond grant periods and deadlines. After the project has been completed, residents should continue to be the stewards of ongoing Safe Routes to Parks efforts. Consider hosting leadership and organizing trainings for community members to build skills and capacity to support continued activities and strong relationships between residents and community-based organizations.

In action: Community members in Youngstown, Ohio, worked with Safe Routes to Parks grantee Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation to transform dilapidated tennis courts into a lively, welcoming green space with [sustainability in mind](#).

In Youngstown, Ohio, Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC), a 2018 Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities program grantee, built on a series of early wins to generate enough interest and momentum in sustaining its Safe Routes to Parks efforts. With funding from the Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities Grant, YNDC arranged to remove the court blacktop and plant green grass seed in the space. A split rail fence was built to prevent car access and four LED spotlights were installed to illuminate the area. These improvements caught the attention of local residents and elected officials alike. Councilwoman Lauren McNally, whose ward covers Glenwood Park, donated \$10,000 to repair broken sidewalks leading to the park.



Conclusion

Involving community members from the very beginning and throughout the Safe Routes to Parks project is key to creating meaningful, long-lasting improvements to park quality and access. For more tips on effective community engagement, check out our [Checklist for Facilitating Community Engagement During Safe Routes to Parks Visioning Activities](#).

As a result of Greenfield Walking Group and community members' Safe Routes to Parks work at Rexland Acres Park, the Kent County Department of Public Works scoped a one-mile area and found major routes to school that needed improvements. They secured a grant for \$5.6 million for continental crosswalks and flashing stop signs, new bus stops for students and road diets to make it safer to walk around the neighborhood. In addition, Greenfield Walking Group is continuing to work with Kent County DPW to improve access to other parks in the community. "Everyone in this community works together to improve Safe Routes to Parks and Safe Routes to School," says Alcantar.



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