

Complete Streets: A Public Health Prescription

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Vermont Public Health Association (VtPHA). VtPHA is a statewide membership organization that seeks to positively influence the health of all Vermonters and provide an independent voice on public health issues.

We focus on preventing disease, disability and injury—with the critical emphasis here on prevention. Public health works through policy change, preventive health services, public education and population-based interventions.

Health Status

Improving community health and health outcomes requires an understanding of the multiple contributors to health status. Health status is determined by: genetics 20 – 30%; health care 10%; social, environmental conditions, and behavior 60 – 70% (*Health Affairs, 2002*). If we want to improve health now and in the future, we need to address behavioral, social and environmental conditions. Design of our communities matters. If our communities are built to support physical activity, safe walking and biking, and use of public transportation, people can lead healthier, more active lives. Communities that are physically connected – with places to walk and informally meet with others – are socially connected. Social connection is a critical component in mental health.

Obesity and chronic disease

Obesity is quickly becoming a leading public health problem in Vermont. The obesity rate for adults Vermonters rose 100% percent from 1990 to 2008 with over half of all Vermont adults overweight or obese, and overweight among children increasing at an equally alarming rate. Being overweight increases the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, heart disease and certain cancers. In addition to these personal costs, estimated health care costs attributable to obesity in Vermont are \$141 million dollars¹ and this does not include the indirect costs of obesity such as lost work days and lower worker productivity.

Physical Inactivity

Health experts agree that a big factor is inactivity – 55 percent of the U.S. adult population falls short of recommended activity guidelines, and approximately 25

¹ Finkelstein, E.A., Fiebelkorn, I.C., Wang, G. (2004) State-Level Estimates of Annual Medical Expenditures Attributable to Obesity. *Obesity Research*, 12(1): 18-24.

percent report being completely inactive. Inactivity is a factor in many diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

The good news is that increasing physical activity is proven to reduce obesity, save lives and save money. For example, if inactive older adults increased their physical activity to 90 minutes/week, \$2,200 could be saved every year per person.²

Vermonters are known for active living and healthy choices, but personal commitment alone is not enough when our current street design makes it difficult to get from here to there without driving and limits our ability to choose an easy way to increase our daily physical activity.

Complete streets offer additional opportunities to be active as part of daily life. According to the *American Journal of Public Health*, 43% of people with safe places to walk within 10 minutes of home met recommended activity levels; among those without safe places to walk, just 27% met the recommendation. Residents are 65% more likely to walk in a neighborhood with sidewalks.

Safety

Complete streets also protect the health and safety for all road users, including drivers. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death due to injuries in Vermont (22% of all injury deaths), and the leading cause of death from all causes for children. Motor vehicles are also the leading cause of injury related hospitalizations for young adults (15-24). Pedestrian crashes are more than twice as likely to occur in places without sidewalks, and streets with sidewalks on both sides have the fewest crashes. Streets designed with sidewalks, raised medians, better bus stop placement, traffic-calming measures, and treatments for disabled travelers improve pedestrian safety.

Asthma and Air Quality

Air pollution, caused by motor vehicles, is associated with several health issues, including asthma and respiratory illness, heart disease, and cancer. Like obesity, asthma is a major public health problem.

Compared to Vermonters without asthma, Vermonters with asthma are more likely to have arthritis, obesity, depression, cardiovascular disease and COPD. Asthma carries with it significant personal and community costs in terms of health care expenditures.

² ¹² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2003) Preventing Obesity and Chronic Diseases Through Good Nutrition and Physical Activity. Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Example: Jericho where complete streets could have made a difference

The hot issue at town meeting this year was the bridge on Route 15. This short bridge crosses a river at a sharp turn in the road where there is a funky merging on the road. On one side of the river is the community coffee shop, preschool and walking trails. On the other side is the popular creamie stand frequented by many from the town and elsewhere.

There was once a footbridge over the river connected to the bridge for vehicle travel. Repairs to the footbridge however were unaddressed when repairs were done for motor vehicles. Parents are concerned about children safely crossing and older adults are worried about limited sight and potential crashes with pedestrians and bicyclists. This situation has persisted for five years – with lots of state and local discussion but continual dead ends for the town despite the urgency.

Support Complete Streets

VtPHA urges adoption of state policy on Complete Street. We need policy to ensure design and operation of the entire roadway with all users in mind is given priority in state and local decision-making. Streets designed with sidewalks, separate bike lanes, raised medians, better bus stop placement, traffic-calming measures, and treatments for disabled travelers will protect the health and safety for all road users, including drivers. Complete streets will ensure that all Vermonters can safely share the road on our way to school, work and a healthier life.