Rural Access to Health through Healthy Active Built Environments

Grant Program Summary | Year One
Foreword

When we think about quality of life, many of us may imagine special times with friends and family. We might think about the places where we go to make these memories – our favorite park, taking a walk down Main Street or maybe eating at our favorite local restaurant. Maybe we think about special community events like festivals and parades. We might think about homes decorated for the holidays or resplendent with flowers in the spring.

Our memories and experiences are shaped by the places in which we live. At the Tennessee Department of Health we recognize that these places and experiences also impact our health. Whether we are enjoying a walk on a greenway, playing with our children at a playground, planting a community garden or enjoying the quiet solitude of the woods, our health is largely shaped by the places around us. Of particular importance is the time we spend outdoors. Research tells us that being outside impacts all aspects of our health – mental, emotional and physical. In order for each of us to live to our fullest potential and to have the highest quality of life, we need places in our communities that support our optimal health.

For these reasons, the Tennessee Department of Health is investing in places. In all 95 counties you may see playgrounds, walking tracks, greenways, sports courts, community gardens, farmers markets, story book trails and public art that we have supported. We work alongside local governments and our sister state agencies to help communities create plans for parks, greenways, downtowns and outdoor recreation and help those plans come to life. Sometimes a small amount of money is all it takes for a community to take a first step and continue to build off those early successes.

We hope you will enjoy this report in which we are highlighting some of the initiatives funded by our department through the Rural Access to Health through Healthy Active Built Environments grants. This work would not be possible without the vision and dedication of local leaders who are making their communities exciting, attractive, and healthy places for Tennesseans to live, work and play.

Enjoy!

Leslie Meehan
Director, Office of Primary Prevention, Tennessee Department of Health

Acknowledgements

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Cover photo: A walking track funded at Smyrna Elementary School in Rutherford County.

Office of Primary Prevention

Mission
The Office of Primary Prevention works to educate others about the purpose and impact of primary prevention, support community primary prevention activities, and foster change through cross-sector collaboration within and external to the Tennessee Department of Health.

Vision
Everyone in Tennessee can make healthy choices wherever they live, learn, work, play and pray.

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About the Grants

The *Rural Access to Health through Healthy Active Built Environments* grants were launched by the Tennessee Department of Health in 2017, offering $10,000 to each of the 89 rural and suburban county health departments in Tennessee.

Each local health department identified projects promoting active living in their county to fund with the grant. Projects address a health need in the community and are all accessible to the public at no cost. The funds were used for new construction, improvement, or planning of facilities and infrastructure.

The grant awards were non-competitive, did not require matching funds, and could be used as a match for other grant programs.

Partnerships, community engagement, and health equity were encouraged when developing each grant project. All grantees evaluated the community impacts of their projects.
Health-Promoting Projects Across Tennessee

The grants funded a total of 106 grant projects in the 89 rural and suburban counties across Tennessee. Local health departments worked with local partners to develop project proposals. Each project had to plan, build, or improve a built environment project that was available to all members of their community at no cost. Communities used funding to build or improve 31 playgrounds, 27 walking tracks, 24 outdoor exercise equipment stations, and 9 sports facilities among other types of projects. Three master plans were funded for physical activity, parks, and bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. Funded projects also include establishing a bike share program at a local community center, trail and wayfinding signage, a storybook trail, a pump track for off-road biking, and bike racks and maintenance stations.

Locations of the 106 Projects Funded in Year One

> Some projects included multiple types listed above.
Empowering Communities

Each community identified and developed their own built enviornment projects to ensure they were relevant to community needs. The funding was non-competitive with no match requirement since many small rural and suburban communities do not have the capacity for grant-writing or local funds required for a match.

A total of 265 local organizational partnerships supported the projects, without which many may not have come to fruition. Project partners included local and state government, community non-profits, schools, business organizations, police and firefighters, hospitals, and civic groups.

106 projects funded in Tennessee’s 89 suburban and rural counties

265 organizational partnerships supported the projects

99 projects aimed to serve children and youth under 18

76 projects aimed to serve older adults ages 65+

Photo: Crosswalk, sidewalk improvements, and pedestrian signals funded in Bradley County made this intersection safer for users of all abilities.
Fifty-four of Tennessee’s 95 counties are categorized as economically distressed or at-risk by the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development. The grant program funded 57 projects in these counties. Spaces for residents and visitors that promote physical activity, recreation, and social life are important factors in promoting economic development in suburban and rural communities.

Data Source: Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, 2019

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**Project Example | Sequatchie County**

**Community Plan**

The Valley Fest Master Plan for Dunlap, Tennessee was developed with a goal to increase physical activity opportunities and to provide access and connectivity between the Valley Fest site and the city’s urban fabric. Input from the community was included during the planning process, including public meetings and a design charrette. Fully funded through the grant program, the resulting master plan provided solutions for enhancing active transportation connectivity to the site, increased activities for youth and teens, multimodal transportation connections to the surrounding neighborhoods, and connections between the site and adjacent recreational areas.

Total cost of this project: $10,000

**Project partners:**
Sequatchie County Health Department
Sequatchie Chamber of Commerce
Valley Fest Advisory Board
Sequatchie County Government

Data Source: American Community Survey 2014-2018 5-yr Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau
Improving Health

While all of the projects were required to promote either physical activity or healthy eating, specific health factors targeted with the projects included social interaction, air quality, walkability, bikeability, pedestrian and cyclist safety, access to nature, mental health and well-being, and accessibility for persons with disabilities.

 HEALTH FACTORS TARGETED

- Exercise: 101
- Social Interaction: 87
- Mental Health and Well-Being: 64
- Access to Nature: 43
- Walkability: 34
- Accessibility: 28
- Pedestrian Safety: 24
- Bikeability: 13
- Cyclist Safety: 8
- Air Quality: 4
- Healthy Eating: 3

Of the 106 projects, 99 aimed to serve children and youth 18 and under, and 76 aimed to serve older adults aged 65+. Half of the projects (53) were designed to serve users with a disability. Walking tracks were paved to ensure they are accessible for those with limited mobility, and several projects included playground equipment for children with special needs.

53 projects designed to accommodate users with a disability

Project Example | Rutherford County

Elementary School Walking Track

A new walking track was built using grant funds at Smyrna Elementary School in Rutherford County. The goal of the project was to increase physical activity opportunities for children in the community. The new track is paved and ADA accessible for users with disabilities. At the school, 47% of classes use the track 1-2 days per week. A survey of teachers at the school found that 80% of students look forward to track time, and 81% of teachers report students are better able to focus in the classroom after track time. Shortly after completion, a Mayor Walk was held at the track where the County Mayor and Director of Schools walked 1 mile with all first grade students.

Total cost of this project: $21,500

Project partners:
Rutherford County Health Department
Richard Siegel Foundation
Rutherford County Wellness Council
Tennessee Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance
**Project Example | Hickman County**

**Outdoor Fitness Equipment**

Centerville River Park received new outdoor fitness equipment specifically designed for both teens and adults. The space provides parents the opportunity to exercise while watching their children play on the nearby playground. To introduce the new outdoor fitness equipment, a family-oriented ‘Play Day’ event was held at the nearby walking trail. Community partners who led activities during the event included the Tennessee Highway Patrol, Coordinated School Health, Women Are Safe, Hickman County High School Beta Club, Life Care Center of Centerville, Centerville Volunteer Fire Department, Hickman County EMS, and members of the local health council. The new fitness equipment provides increased access to physical activity opportunities for the surrounding neighborhoods, with 138 households with a quarter mile of the park and 348 households within a half mile, distances that are close enough for nearby residents to walk or bike to the park.

Total cost of this project: $10,000

**Project partners:**
- Hickman County Health Department
- Hickman County UT Extension Office
- Saint Thomas Hickman Health Services
- Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Dev.
- Town of Centerville
- Coordinated School Health

**Project Example | Warren County**

**Skatepark**

Grant funds supported the construction of a skatepark at the Civic Center in McMinnville. The skatepark provides a legal and approved space for people to skate in the community and is located within the community’s large recreation complex. The Friends of the Greenway helped gather public input for the design and location of the project, working with the City of McMinnville and the county to bring it to fruition. A large gift from the Steve and Kate Smith Community Trust was paired with city funds and health department grant funds to complete the skate park, which sees about twenty users per day.

Total cost of this project: $160,000

**Project partners:**
- Warren County Health Department
- Friends of the Greenway, Inc.
- City of McMinnville
Evaluating Impact

Each grantee developed a plan to evaluate the impact of their project. The Tennessee Department of Health’s Office of Primary Prevention developed the *Built Environment Evaluation Guide* to assist grantees with designing their evaluations. Most evaluations focused on measuring *use* or *access* and involved either surveys or systematic observations of facility use. The *surveys* asked questions such as how often people visit the facilities, what they do there, who they go with, and whether visiting the facility has impacted their level of physical activity or those of their children. Some grantees conducted systematic *observations* of facility use to determine the number and demographics of users, what activities they are engaged in, and how physically active or social they are. For new facilities, some grantees performed an analysis to determine how many households gained *access* within walking distance or a short drive of the facility. The Tennessee Department of Health’s Healthy Development Coordinators provided on-the-ground evaluation support for many of the projects, and most evaluations involved collaboration with local health department staff, school staff, development districts, and other partners. Overall, the purpose of the evaluations was to help grantees determine the value of each project to their community’s health.

Project Example  |  Unicoi County

Walking Track and Playground Equipment

A new playground was installed and a walking path was paved at the old Flag Pond Elementary School, which is currently office space to Rocky Fork State Park staff and houses the Ruritan Club. The walking track can be used by parents while their children visit the playground. This project was on the community’s wish list for years and would likely not have come to fruition without this grant funding. A survey of playground and walking track users found that 52% use them a few times per week, and 13% use them every day. The survey also found that 84% of users are more physically active in general because they visit the playground and walking path. Roughly half of the adults surveyed bring children with them to the playground and walking path, and 82% of parents felt their children are more physically active because of the improvements.

Total cost of this project: $10,000

Project partners:

- Unicoi County Health Department
- Rocky Fork State Park
- Unicoi Ruritan Club
- Tennessee Department of Transportation
- Unicoi County Government
What Communities Told Us

“As long as the weather permits, K-6 go out every day and students walk on the track on their own for enjoyment. Teachers walk with them as well. We have some parents that have been coming with their children in the evenings and on weekends to walk. The trail is also enjoyed by employees. Prior to paving, it wasn’t used as frequently. It’s been a wonderful addition and we really appreciate your assistance.”

- Meranda Cook, Principal, Defeated Elementary School

"Both walking tracks give residents a place to go to exercise in safety when they typically would walk on the road before installation. Now they can drive just a couple minutes and get the exercise they want or need. It’s been an important addition for these communities because there are so few safe places to be active out in the county. There are people of all ages who rarely exercised who now go out and use the tracks regularly."

- Greg Wilson, Mayor Van Buren County

"Improving the track has been on my list of enhancements for three years. I have a parent who owns his own paving equipment that said that he would donate his time and equipment when we were ready to make the improvements. The money from the grant allowed us to purchase the necessary items needed to make the improvements."

- Wendolyn Kittrell, Principal Union Heights Elementary School

"On behalf of my staff and students enrolled in Operation Hope Hohenwald's after school program and summer day camp, I would like to express our gratitude for the improvements made at Memorial Park. Our organization utilizes the park forty days in the summer and on Fridays during the school year, weather permitting. The children were thrilled with the improvements. Our park serves our children. When we invest in our park, we invest in our children. When we invest in our children, we invest in the future of our county."

- Operation Hope Hohenwald, Lewis County

The project has been instrumental in making our downtown more walkable, especially with the new venue on the back side of the courthouse. There was much higher attendance at each of our events around the square compared to years past and we utilized the new performing area and sidewalks on the back side of the square at our Christmas Trees and Trails event. We are in the process of developing a walking tour of our historical downtown as a result of this project as well. People are really excited about this development and we anticipate even more movement around the square and in our downtown as the weather gets nicer. The chamber is directly across from the square and we've noticed tremendously more walking activity since the project occurred. Along with new sidewalks, the project included resurfacing current sidewalks, which was vital to ADA compliance and associated accessibility to all. The health department grant allowed the larger project to move along more quickly, a project significantly invested in by the county government.

- Leann Smith, Director Fentress County Chamber of Commerce
What We Learned

The *Rural Access to Health through Healthy Active Built Environments* grant program highlighted in this report represents the Tennessee Department of Health’s first effort to provide non-competitive funding for built environment projects across the state.

From this experience we learned several important lessons.

Local governments and health departments already recognized the importance of built environment projects to the health of their communities. This funding provided opportunities to implement projects many localities had wanted to develop for years but lacked the needed funding.

We found that even small amounts of funding were enough to build, improve, or plan a project that promotes physical activity and social life in rural and suburban communities. Each county was awarded $10,000. Six communities used their funds as a match for another grant, 62 projects included additional funding sources, and 66 projects cost $10,000 or less. *Access to Health* grant funds supported projects that represent a combined investment of $9.7 million across the state.

In many instances, community volunteers donated their time and labor, and local governments, non-profits, and businesses contributed additional funding to support the projects. In-kind donations for labor and materials helped bring 32 of the projects to fruition.

Perhaps most importantly, public health departments have an important role to play in supporting the development of healthy built environments in rural and suburban communities. Based on our experience we observed that grant funding offers health departments an opportunity to support existing local efforts or develop new projects that provide places for physical activity and social life in their communities.
Moving Forward

Following the success of the Rural Access to Health through Healthy Active Built Environments grant program, the Tennessee Department of Health has continued to fund built environment projects across the state. In 2018, the department launched the competitive Access to Health built environment grant program available to local governments, state government agencies, and non-profit organizations in all 95 counties. The department awarded over $1.8 million in grants to 35 grantees across Tennessee. Grant funds supported convening, programming, planning, and construction of health-promoting built environment projects, including playgrounds, walking tracks, outdoor fitness stations, greenways and trails, and other publicly-accessible spaces that promote physical activity and social interaction for communities. Grant applications were received from 75% of Tennessee counties, totaling nearly $8 million in requested funding. An additional round of $20,000 non-competitive awards were released in 2019 to all 95 counties in Tennessee. A second round of competitive grant funding was released in the fall of 2020, making an additional $800,000 available to governments and non-profits in Tennessee. To learn more about the Tennessee Department of Health’s catalogue of built environment work please visit us at tn.gov/builtenvironment.

Learn More about the Tennessee Department of Health’s Built Environment Work
tn.gov/builtenvironment

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