

Chapter 4:

A Guide to Community-Wide Walking Campaigns

A 40-page handbook called *Be Active for Life* was at the heart of the Active for Life™ (AFL) campaign that AARP and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) launched to promote the benefits of physical activity among midlife and older adults in Richmond, Virginia and Madison, Wisconsin. The handbook offered guidance on how readers could design and carry out their own physical activity programs. Its questionnaires helped participants determine how much physical activity they were currently getting and to gauge their readiness to increase those activity levels. The book also offered tips to help readers sustain new activity levels and provided a comprehensive listing of local organizations that could offer more information about exercise, fitness and health.

During AFL's first year, community partners in both cities incorporated the handbook's 12-week, self-directed program into their existing classes and programs for people aged 50 years and older. In addition, AFL promoted the handbook as a perfect companion for people who wanted to pursue their own program to become more physically active.

AFL was successful in reaching a large audience; in fact, it reached about 12,000 people in the targeted age group during its first year. Yet, AARP research showed that the campaign's target audience viewed the AFL promotional effort—and its call for midlife and older adults to simply “be active”—as too general and somewhat ambiguous.

In response to these findings, AFL decided to make major modifications in its approach to promoting physical activity among the 50+ population. Instead of broadly promoting *all* physical activity, as it had during the first year of the campaign, AFL decided to focus on promoting *one specific* activity—and that activity was walking. Walking was chosen

by AFL—and endorsed by AFL’s local partners—because it had a combination of characteristics that made it accessible to a large number of people. For example:

- ***Walking is popular.*** A review of the research on walking and physical activity, along with AARP research data, showed that walking is the preferred activity for active people aged 50 years and older. Three-quarters (74%) of those who are active say that walking is their most frequent type of exercise. A national survey conducted by Belden Russonello and Stewart in October 2002 revealed that more than half of the American public would like to walk more throughout the day than they currently do, either for exercise or to get to specific places.
- ***Walking is a universal activity.*** It doesn’t require any training and it is appropriate for people of all cultures and many levels of disability.
- ***Walking is safe and easy for most people.*** Walking is recommended for almost every older adult. It’s gentle on the body. People can do it in many venues, alone or with others. In addition, people can engage in walking throughout the year by adjusting the time of day that they walk, wearing different clothing to suit the weather, or walking indoors at a mall when the weather is inclement. Even the most sedentary of people in the targeted age group are capable of walking.
- ***Walking is both preventive and therapeutic.*** Walking briskly for at least 30 minutes a day, at least five times a week can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis, arthritis and some cancers, and may enhance mental health. Physical activities such as walking are also recommended for the therapeutic treatment of many chronic diseases.
- ***Walking is inexpensive.*** Walking doesn’t cost anything and requires no special equipment, except a good pair of shoes. Likewise, programs to promote walking are relatively inexpensive to implement and easy to promote.

- ***Walking leads to other activities.*** Health and fitness professionals who participated in AFL offered anecdotal evidence that people who get hooked on walking may be more likely to participate in other physical activities, such as strength training or tennis. AFL’s experience showed that walking programs can also positively affect entire communities by helping policy makers think more broadly about how they can support active-living behaviors among their residents. For example, AFL’s walking campaign played an important role in bringing about local environmental and policy changes that would help Madison and Richmond become more “walkable” communities.

Designing a Walking Campaign

AFL and its partners believed that the positive characteristics of walking, identified above, would make this activity appealing to midlife and older adults. In addition, AFL had several, more practical reasons for deciding to focus its physical activity promotion activities around walking. These reasons included the following:

- ***Walking-focused campaign messages would be simpler, clearer and easier to communicate*** than AFL’s previous messages, which generally encouraged people to be “physically active.” Campaign research had already shown that these general messages were viewed by the target audience as being ambiguous.
- ***Walking represented one specific activity in which a large majority of campaign participants could engage*** during one 12-week time period. AFL hoped that this unifying feature would increase local participation in its formal walking campaign.
- ***Walking is easy to measure using step counters***, which are small, pager-like devices that clip onto the waistband of clothing and count every step the walker takes. Campaign participants would be able to use these step counters to set individualized walking goals and track their progress toward meeting those goals. No similar measurement tool was available to track physical activity in general.

Before choosing a design for its own walking campaign, AFL studied the structure and outcomes of several existing walking programs, all of which asked participants to walk 10,000 steps per day and to use a step counter to keep track of the number of steps they took. Documented outcomes from these programs were encouraging and included the following:

- Research by HealthPartners, a Minnesota-based not-for-profit health maintenance organization, showed that after eight weeks in its step-counting program, 81 percent of participants stated that the program had helped them increase their level of physical activity. After eight months, 90 percent of participants reported that they had achieved the public health recommendations for physical activity on most days of the week. More than half (53%) were still using their step counters at the eight-month mark, and almost all (90%) felt the program had motivated them to increase their daily activity.
- The Maine Partnership for Healthy Aging reported that older participants in its step-counting program increased their steps by 143 percent during one winter. During previous winters, inclement weather had forced them to become more sedentary.
- Colorado on the Move, a statewide initiative to prevent obesity and improve health through physical activity, found that step counters helped residents pay attention to their physical activity and, consequently, to increase it.

Encouraged by these research results, and convinced that walking could offer great benefits to the 50+ population, AFL launched broad-based walking campaigns in Richmond and Madison in 2003. The campaigns ran for approximately 12 weeks and used step counters as motivational tools to keep participants working toward their walking goals. Initially, the AFL walking campaigns encouraged participants to take 10,000 steps a day. However, AFL soon found out that this 10,000-steps-a-day requirement could be daunting for many older adults. Not wanting to frustrate these walkers, AFL subsequently dropped the 10,000-step feature from its program and suggested that participants start their walking program by determining how many steps they currently took each day, thereby establishing a baseline. Then, each participant was encouraged

to set an individualized goal for how to increase his or her steps during the course of the campaign.

Even though AFL dropped the 10,000-step feature from its walking program, it retained other components of the successful walking programs that it had studied. These components involved distributing to participants (1) step counters, (2) a participant guide, (3) articles about how to enhance the walking experience and (4) several forms that participants could use to record their activity and plot their progress over time.

Elements of a Community-Wide Walking Campaign

The Active for Life™ walking campaign had several key components:

- ***A kickoff or launch event.*** Both AFL Richmond and AFL Madison held kickoff events for their walking campaigns. These events took place in large public places and featured speeches presented by well-known public figures, the distribution of AARP-branded step counters and a ceremonial walk.
- ***Distribution of step counters.*** AFL distributed more than 11,000 free step counters: more than 6,000 in Richmond and more than 5,000 in Madison. People who received step counters were asked to sign a waiver, which captured their names and addresses and released AFL from liability in the event that campaign participants sustained injuries. The waiver also gave AFL permission to contact participants after the campaign concluded in order to evaluate their progress and the campaign’s success.
- ***The involvement of community partners.*** AFL partners participated in the kickoff events for each campaign. After each kickoff, these partners continued to distribute step counters and implemented walking programs throughout their regions.

- **Web site and toll-free number.** A special walking campaign Web site and toll-free telephone number offered around-the-clock information about the campaign, including where participants could pick up step counters.
- **A media campaign.** AFL developed a “Walking? Who Knew?” ad campaign on television, which used a tongue-in-cheek spoof on infomercials to convince viewers that walking was easy and offered myriad health benefits. Print ads, which appeared in local newspapers and magazines, emphasized the ease and benefits of walking and directed program participants to distribution sites where they could receive their free step counters. The ads also promoted AFL’s physical activity prescription (at least 30 minutes a day, at least five days a week), its toll-free number and its Web-site address. (See Chapter 1 of this guide for more information about walking campaign promotional activities.)

Lessons Learned from the Walking Campaign

AFL learned important lessons as it planned and conducted each element of its walking campaign, including the kickoff events that helped launch the campaign in Richmond and Madison. Those lessons include the following:

Lesson #1:

Local celebrities will add credibility and visibility to any walking campaign.

Local political figures came to events in Madison and Richmond that were designed to kick off the walking campaign. Through their keynote addresses during the events, and their statements to local reporters afterwards, these high-profile individuals demonstrated their support for AFL and encouraged local residents to join and stick with the walking campaign. On a practical level, the presence of local celebrities also increased the chances that media outlets would be interested in covering the kickoff events.

At Richmond’s kickoff event, Virginia’s first lady spoke about the benefits that walking held for people of all ages and then led an intergenerational walk around an elementary schoolyard. In Madison, Wisconsin’s lieutenant governor and Madison’s mayor led a walk around the city’s Capitol Square. The lieutenant governor made the event memorable when she gave “high-fives” to every participant as he or she finished the ceremonial walk. This spontaneous gesture added a celebratory feel to the event that motivated walkers and provided positive media coverage.

Lesson #2:

Community partners need tangible and visible ways to get involved in a walking campaign.

Community partners in Richmond and Madison chose to get involved in the AFL walking campaign because they hoped the campaign would help to increase the viability and credibility of their own programs. This is not unusual: the most successful collaborations offer benefits to all partners. (See Chapter 2 of this guide for more information about AFL collaborations at the local level.)

Given these motivations, it was important to provide AFL partners with meaningful ways to participate in the kickoff events. Partners needed assignments that would increase their visibility before the public and allow them to share their programs and expertise with the community’s 50+ population. With this in mind, AFL asked its partners in Richmond and Madison to distribute step counters and conduct educational sessions at the kickoff events. After the events, the partners continued to distribute step counters and implemented walking programs throughout the region.

Lesson #3:

Consider carefully how you structure participant incentives.

To test its new focus on walking, AFL launched small walking pilot programs in Richmond and Madison months before its official walking campaign began. During these pilots, AFL tested the

theory that consumers would be more likely to complete a walking campaign if they knew that a reward or prize was waiting for them at the “finish line.” Female participants, all of whom were AARP members, were offered two rewards if they finished the pilot walking program and returned an evaluation card. First, AFL would send them a motivational book about physical activity, called *Mind Walks*. Second, AFL would enter their names into a drawing for two free airline tickets to one of the 10-best walking destinations in the nation. Despite these incentives, very few participants returned the evaluation card.

On the surface, this poor rate of return might indicate that incentives simply don’t appeal to the 50+ population. However, AFL surveys suggested that the airline tickets didn’t work as an incentive because participants had to engage in too much activity—in other words, they had to complete the entire walking program—before they even had a chance to win a prize. In addition, the airline tickets lost points as a motivational tool because participants knew from the beginning that only one walker would win. The odds were simply not good enough to motivate participants to change their behavior.

This experience suggests that high-priced rewards that are delayed until large amounts of physical activity are completed may not be a good way to motivate participants to stick with a walking campaign. A better approach might be to offer low-key and modest incentives that are timely and frequent.

Lesson #4:

Walking campaign participants need initial education as well as ongoing support and information.

During educational sessions held at the kickoff events in both cities, it became clear that some walking campaign participants didn’t know how to use their step counters. Many participants asked if they should wear the step counters in the shower or to bed. To ensure that step counters would be an effective part of the walking campaign, AFL provided simple, yet specific,

instructions to participants about how to wear and use the devices. In addition, AFL and its partners sponsored the following educational outreach for participants:

- **Web sites.** Customized Web sites in each city provided consumers with information on such topics as how to purchase a step counter and where to find a good walking trail. The Web sites also sought to keep walkers motivated by posting success stories about walking campaign participants.
- **Toll-free hot lines.** People who didn't have Internet access could call a toll-free number to hear announcements about distribution sites where they could receive free step counters and other campaign information.
- **Walking sessions.** Many of the campaign's partners held weekly walking sessions to keep participants involved in their new walking regimen and to provide a social setting for exercise. These group sessions were often led by self-chosen leaders who scheduled walks independently or in conjunction with a formal program sponsored by AFL community partners.
- **Educational sessions.** During weekly educational sessions, partners taught campaign participants the right way to walk, helped them to identify and attain their walking goals, and facilitated social support networks that would help them continue their physical activity routines. These sessions provided important public exposure for partners and helped keep up the campaign's momentum.
- **Maps.** Maps of designated walking trails or good walking routes within Richmond and Madison gave campaign participants a clear idea of where they could walk safely.

Lesson #5:

Keeping track of participants' progress helps to measure a walking campaign's success and to keep participants on track.

AFL was very deliberate about documenting the progress that participants made during the walking campaign. It surveyed participants before and after they joined the campaign to determine whether they had increased their physical activity. In addition, each participant in the campaign was asked to complete and turn in weekly walking logs that provided information about the number of steps that he or she had taken during the past seven days. Having information about a participant's walking regimen helped AFL assess how successful it had been in helping participants reach the campaign's goals. Madison's very encouraging results showed measurable increases in participants' awareness of physical activity benefits and their knowledge about recommended activity levels. Results in Richmond, while not as dramatic, also showed an increase in awareness of and knowledge about physical activity. No statistically significant increases in walking behavior were recorded in either city.

The data collected by AFL also allowed the campaign to help participants assess their own individual progress. In addition, the walking logs served as a motivational tool in and of themselves. AFL found that participants were more likely to be active if they knew they would be expected to turn in weekly step counts.

Lesson #6:

It is essential for walking campaigns to offer participants the options of step counters and peer support.

Anxious to apply the lessons learned during the AFL walking campaign to other areas of the country, AARP decided to pilot-test three different walking program models in 2004, a year after the conclusion of Active for Life™. Pilot tests were conducted in Raleigh, North Carolina; Little Rock, Arkansas; Columbia, South Carolina; and Montgomery, Alabama.

One model used step counters as a motivational tool, whereas another model focused solely on providing peer support to participants through walking groups and other activities. A third model offered both step counters and peer support to keep participants engaged in walking. Like the AFL walking campaign, each model encouraged participants to increase the amount of walking they did each day and to ultimately work up to walking 10,000 steps a day.

Results of the pilot tests suggest that combining the use of step counters with peer support worked better than either step counters alone or peer support alone in motivating participants to stick with a walking campaign. The sociability of walking groups also kept participants moving, according to pilot test results.

The step counters served as a tool to get participants interested in walking and helped them track the number of steps they took each day. Research shows that tracking behavior and keeping logs are important tools in changing behavior. Step counters are an acceptable way to do this, although some participants may prefer to track time or mileage. Whatever method is used, a tracking feature is important, because people tend to overestimate their level of activity.

Conclusion

Walking is an activity that almost anyone can do. It requires no training and little equipment, is gentle on the body and has the potential of getting even sedentary individuals hooked on physical activity. In addition, it provides myriad benefits for midlife and older adults. These characteristics make walking the “physical activity of choice” for this population group and a perfect activity on which to focus a campaign to promote increased physical activity. By providing step counters to encourage activity, and peer support to help sustain that activity, local organizations can launch walking campaigns that will have a significant impact on a community’s level of activity without using significant amounts of the organization’s limited resources.