# Healthy policies: NLAPH supports leaders for change

## An NLAPH team in Sacramento County develops policies for bikeable and walkable communities

The National Leadership Academy for the Public's Health (NLAPH) is a one-year applied leadership training program for cross-sector teams located across the United States. Teams engage in action learning projects to improve community health and realize health equity. Action learning projects have influenced policy in areas such as smoke-free housing and parks, workplace wellness, and vaccine reimbursement and distribution.

In 2013, an NLAPH team called Design 4 Active Sacramento in Sacramento, California engaged in a successful action learning project focused on influencing the county's comprehensive planning process. Their story provides an illustrative example for both policy change work and the NLAPH training program. The team's active design appendix, housing element, zoning code recommendations and active design inclusion in the county-wide Design Guidelines were adopted in the final development plan that guides development for many years. The team's work paved the way for policies that will make the county more healthy and active for its residents for years to come.

## Background

Policy change is developed along a spectrum of activities: pre-policy (clearly defining the problem or solutions), policy development (building political will), policy (influencing decisions on a specific policy), and policy implementation (ensuring effective implementation of a policy).[1] NLAPH helps teams with their policy work along the entire spectrum.



Through NLAPH, multiple sectors—including public health, planning, and transportation—are coming together in organizations, cities, counties, and states to develop and implement policies that influence health behavior and quality of life. In 2013, an NLAPH team in Sacramento, California successfully influenced several components of the county's comprehensive plan that will have a long term impact on development decisions.

[1] Ottoson JM, Green LW, Beery WL, Senter SK, Cahill CL, Pearson DC, Greenwald HP, Hamre R, Leviton L. Policy-contribution assessment and field-building analysis of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Active Living Research Program. Am J Prev Med. 2009 Feb;36(2 Suppl):S34-43. doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2008.10.010

## Design for Active Sacramento

Design 4 Active Sacramento (D4AS) was convened in order to participate in NLAPH. Team members had worked together before NLAPH, but not on community health improvement projects. The original team included a planner, public health officer, nonprofit executive director, civil engineer, public information coordinator, and a neurosurgeon. After NLAPH it was expanded to include other physicians (including two from public health), the NLAPH coach, and a landscape architect. The team's work had strong support and participation from leadership at the Sacramento Department of Public Health and the Community Development Department. The team spent its NLAPH year focused both on growing as leaders and on leveraging existing investments, connections, and momentum to advance active design policy in Sacramento County.

Designing for active communities—or active living design—implements such features as dense, mixed use development and pedestrian and bike friendly connected streets, trees, and other safety features. The active living design approach emphasizes strategies for creating healthier buildings, streets, and shared spaces. Environments that encourage active lifestyles show a broad range of benefits beyond health, including economic benefits such as increased home value, greater retail activity, reduced health care costs, and improved productivity.[2]

D4AS took advantage of an opportunity to make a difference in Sacramento County's general plan and zoning code. The county's Comprehensive General Plan (2005-2030) provides a long-range vision for zoning, land use, and development in local communities; the zoning code and companion design guidelines implement the general plan. Concurrent with D4AS's NLAPH participation, the county began a major overhaul of the zoning code for the first time in more than 30 years. D4AS's NLAPH action learning project focused on influencing several components of the comprehensive planning process. Through this work team members grew as leaders, cemented a foundation for teamwork into the future, and influenced tangible policy changes.

The D4AS team came to NLAPH positioned for success. They had skills in planning, active living design, transportation, and public health, as well as relationships with other public and private sector organizations. Members of this team also had been involved with a local transportation corridor plan that was incorporating health into a transit-supportive project advancing public policy.

> We established D4AS to improve health outcomes in Sacramento communities by influencing the policies and systems of the built environment that impact our health.
>
> — D4AS team member

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[2] Sallis JF, Spoon C, Cavill N, Engelberg J, Gebel K, Lou D, Parker M, Thornton CM, Wilson A, Cutter CL, Ding D. (2015). *Making the Case for Designing Active Cities*. San Diego, CA: Active Living Research.

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The team brought key qualities when they began with NLAPH: pre-existing relationships, positional power to drive decisions, mission focus, political savvy, content expertise, mutual respect, and long-term perspective—qualities that have been shown to boost success in the NLAPH training program.[3]

While each team member had experience working on policy change, participating in NLAPH gave them an opportunity to work on a specific community health improvement project. The D4AS team credits NLAPH with bringing the members together, focusing their action learning project, and catalyzing effective collaboration with the support of their coach. Team members grew individually as well and reported improvements in their ability to partner and lead collectively and to reach out to new or different groups. The collaborative approach emphasized by NLAPH—sharing leadership and ownership and learning from each other—was critical for their success. D4AS also took advantage of relationships made during the NLAPH year to connect with other teams and share information.

## Influencing policies for healthier communities

The D4AS team engaged in multiple stages of the policy spectrum in an iterative cycle of policy change activities.

### Pre-policy:  Clearly defining the problem or solutions

The D4AS team was committed to "participatory placemaking"—collaborative, community based urban design that emphasizes place specific shared values.[4] Through previous work on a local area plan the team had expertise and experience working in the policy arena.  NLAPH participation required them to articulate a clear vision for their work.

### Policy development:  Building political will

Policies are developed within social, economic and political contexts. Many players compete to secure a place on the decision-making agenda, so building support with key stakeholders is critical. During NLAPH the D4AS team increased awareness of active living design and the possibilities for influencing the comprehensive planning process and related policies.

The team viewed active living design as "a solution that the entire community can get involved in." Their extensive outreach connected them to influential audiences in myriad ways, including engaging population health leaders at 10 area hospitals, making presentations at

> The NLAPH program forced us to think clearly about our goal and our vision, and I think it was our ability to communicate those things clearly that helped enhance our connections and build our network.
>
> — D4AS team member

> Instead of starting at the top of the food chain and working our way down, we're building the political will from the bottom up.
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> — D4AS team member

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[3] *Impact of the National Leadership Academy for the Public's Health: A Cross-case Analysis of 21 Participating Teams.* Seattle: Center for Community Health and Evaluation, July 2015

[4] Project for Public Spaces. *What is Placemaking?* http://www.pps.org/reference/what_is_placemaking/

a number of regional and national conferences, and publishing a journal article.

The team's work resulted in expanded networks and invitations for long-term relationships with other groups working in active living design—the team became seen as experts and allies.

The NLAPH work generated funding during the training year: a grant from California's Strategic Growth Council supported educational presentations, technical assistance and review of pedestrian/ bicycle projects and design guidelines for other jurisdictions in the region.

To expand their reach, influence, and networks, the team also recruited additional members. The D4AS team reported that as they worked to build political will, participation in NLAPH provided a level of credibility that elevated their work in the eyes of key stakeholders.

## Policy: Influencing decisions on a specific policy

Policy change occurs when preparation meets opportunity. In Sacramento County, NLAPH provided training, coaching, and time to devote to the policy groundwork, so the team was prepared to respond to the opportunity to influence the comprehensive plan.

The D4AS team also had the right people involved to take advantage of this opportunity. The team included an influential member from Sacramento County planning leadership who was committed to active living design and recognized how it aligned with goals set by the Department of Community Development. The presence of the Public Health Officer on the team was a significant factor in convincing elected officials that the work was important and necessary for improving community health. This leadership support combined with committed partners from other sectors and a deep understanding of active living design principles positioned this team to succeed.

D4AS delivered actionable policy and design recommendations that were based on established best practices, research, professional experience, and input from the community. D4AS was successful at advancing its policy priorities, including:

Housing element 2013–2021. Successful incorporation of language to make healthy communities a goal for housing and neighborhoods in Sacramento's housing element. This language promotes public health, safety, and livability through community design and shaping the built environment.

Design. Successful addition of a section (Appendix D) of the countywide design guidelines that describes active design and how to incorporate active design features into development projects to promote physical activity and health. New developments and projects within Sacramento county limits must now include active design elements in all projects.

SACRAMENTO COUNTY

**HOUSING ELEMENT** OF *2013-2021*

Sacramento County
Department of Community Development

SACRAMENTO COUNTY
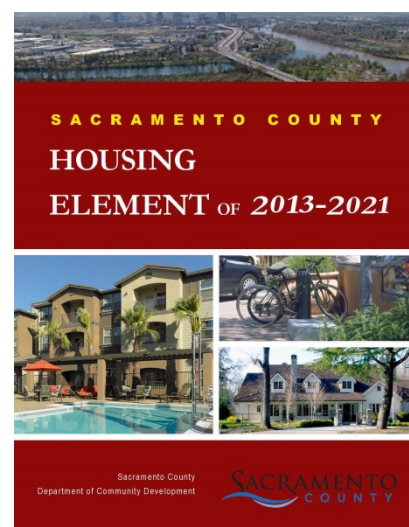
The purpose of the icon is to identify "Active Design." Active Design shall be incorporated into all projects in order to reinforce the community's and County's goal to create a build environment that is sustainable, livable, and promotes active transportation choices such as walking, bicycling, and access transit.

— from the Design Guide

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Zoning code. All new development and uses must comply with Sacramento County's Development Code and Design Guidelines to increase the focus on health and the built environment and emphasize active design and sustainability.

In July 2015, after a three-year process, the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors officially adopted the first major update to the county's development code in 30 years. The zoning and development code and the active design guidelines—informed by D4As efforts—apply to all land uses, including residential, commercial, and industrial.

## Policy implementation: Ensuring effective implementation of a policy

Local change. D4AS used the zoning code and design guidelines to influence a gas station renovation, resulting in the removal of gas pumps as well as an increase in healthy food access in an underserved neighborhood.

Continued issue momentum. D4AS continues to build political will and awareness:  The team presented the active design guidelines and new Housing Element Policies to the California Office of Planning and Research, Active Living Research conference, New York City's FitCity conference, and at the California Department of Public Health's Chronic Disease Prevention Conference. D4AS is working on a national resource exchange website to share best practices and guidelines.

## New resources and enhanced capacity for sustainability

The D4AS team came to NLAPH with the support of team members' respective organizations. After NLAPH they were also able to generate new resources to leverage and sustain their work going forward. D4AS and their coalition partners were recently awarded a national Plan4Health grant in conjunction with the California chapter of the American Planning Association. This funding will advance coordination between the staffs of city planning and public health departments and build upon the work that D4AS has already done within the county.

The team developed a strategic plan and created an organization under the umbrella of nonprofit WALKSacramento. This innovative move creates a focused entity for continued active design work apart from the participants' home organizations.

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Having an independent home for D4AS's active design work increases WALKSacramento's reach into the community and across the state, and strengthens its ability to incorporate healthy, active design into both public and private sector projects.

## Other NLAPH teams have seen impressive policy change results from their action learning projects

### Childhood immunizations in Arizona

When a change in federal law threw vaccine reimbursement practices into disarray, this NLAPH team leveraged their content expertise and professional networks to advocate and plan for change—using custom messaging for different audiences and a data driven approach —for changes in state policies that increased reimbursement rates and improved access to vaccinations for juveniles, particularly those receiving "safety-net" services.

### Smoke-free housing in New York

The Queens Tobacco Control Coalition, an NLAPH team in the New York City borough of Queens, advocated for smoke-free multi-unit housing by building relationships and awareness with real estate developers, management companies, landlords, and community boards. As a direct result of its efforts, well over 2,000 new or existing residences within multi-unit housing developments have been converted to or designated as smoke-free. The team's efforts have also led to 10 of the 14 Queens Community Boards passing smoke free housing resolutions. They report that the momentum they have created has begun to spread to the boroughs of the Bronx and Brooklyn.

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## Summary

**The D4AS example illustrates how an NLAPH team can use its participation in the program to advance policies that will make the community healthier.**

This team, one of more than 100 NLAPH teams participating since 2012, shows what can happen when visionary leaders have a focused opportunity to work across sectors and take advantage of policy change opportunities.

The NLAPH leadership training program capitalizes on the skills individuals bring to the work and builds on those skills. Most critical for D4AS were a strong team leader, intrinsic motivation, a great fit with their NLAPH coach (who joined the team after the training year), and an action learning project that dovetailed with an opportunity for lasting policy change.

### For more information about the Sacramento team, please contact:

Judy Robinson
Chair, Design 4 Active Sacramento
Sustainability Manager-Principal Planner, County of Sacramento
(916) 874-4551
Robinsonju@saccounty.net

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