

Beyond Funding: 21 Communities Create Equitable Public Spaces

Creating a plan for accessible trails, community visioning sessions on inclusive public spaces, preserving natural resource for recreational use for future generations, and creating an age-friendly, contemporary, skatepark open to all including various wheeled disciplines. These are a few examples of how the Healthy Community Design Technical Assistance Pilot made a difference in Vermont's communities.

When the Physical Activity and Nutrition program was offered an opportunity to make grants to address COVID-19 disparities among priority populations, we were excited to get started! We convened partners to explore ways to invest the funds into community projects that centered equity. This was not long after we were all "recovering" from the COVID pandemic. Municipalities were struggling with capacity, including limited time to apply for and manage new grants or to find and hire qualified consultants. Within this context and working closely with Vermont's Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), the idea of a Healthy Community Design Technical Assistance Pilot came to fruition. We were excited to provide pro-active support after working in a reactive mode throughout the pandemic.

Under this unique model, VDH provided a grant to Equitable Cities who developed a team of expert consultants to recruit, identify, and offer TA to communities around the state. Over the 1.5-year period of the project, over 30 communities applied for TA, representing 11 counties and 28 towns/villages. The team ended up working closely with 21 communities. Topics addressed included:

- Transportation (6.3%)
- Walking/rolling/biking (12.5%)
- Food Access (9.4%)

- Outdoor recreation (40.6%)
- Community building (15.6%)
- Healthcare/Health equity (12.5%)
- Renewable energy (3.1%)

Upon completion of the grant, Equitable Cities developed a Toolbox that includes resources communities can use to support their current projects or for communities just starting out looking for resources and assistance.

The team also developed several policy recommendations that would enhance equity in Healthy Community Design. Examples of these include:

- Invest in accessible outdoor spaces,
- Consider all ages and abilities when creating community resources,
- Support functional and aesthetically appealing streetscapes and greenspaces,
- Enhance non-motorized (bike/pedestrian) infrastructure.

The policies also address flood resilience, digital service enhancements, conservation, food access, and community revitalization. Check out the website for the full list.

Through this project we learned that there is a significant need for assistance to communities beyond funding. Activities such as helping communities narrow their project ideas, develop work plans, creating blueprints or 'renderings' of accessible trail networks or outdoor spaces, assisting with walk/bike/roll audits, and identifying and connecting community leaders with new resources were all of value. And finally, we saw there was great interest and motivation to ensure equity was included in these projects. Community members and leaders across Vermont want to create spaces and places that are accessible and welcoming to all. The TA Pilot helped 21 communities successfully achieve this goal.