

Staying active in the winter: Community design that's accessible to Vermonters of all abilities

Winter is fast approaching: High snowbanks, ice covered sidewalks, and limited amount of time to enjoy daylight. It's difficult for anyone to get around when we're in the middle of full-blown winter. And we all know that it can be challenging to keep up with our exercise routine when it's getting dark and even colder by 4:30pm. Now consider the challenges of Vermont's winter weather combined with having a mobility limitation or other disability.

The way that our built environment is designed plays an important role in determining who in our communities can participate and be fully active and engaged community members year-round. About 25% of adults in Vermont report having some type of disability, whether it's a mobility limitation, cognitive disability, or challenge hearing or seeing¹. Additionally, Vermont is the second oldest state in the country. This suggests that a growing number of people will soon be facing the challenges of aging, including a decrease in strength, balance, and reaction time. As a result, it's essential that Vermont communities are designed in ways that are accessible to people of all ages and abilities.

Supporting all Vermonters to be Active

So, what can we do to support all Vermonters in being physically active and engaged in their communities year-round? First, there are several adaptive ski and snow sport organizations and programs located across the state that we can help promote. Examples include [Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports](#), [Smugglers' Notch Adaptive Programs](#), and [The Bart J Ruggiere Adaptive Sports Center](#). [Vermont Special Olympics](#) is also worth noting, as this organization provide opportunities year-round for people of all abilities to stay active and engaged in organized sports.

We can all play a role in shaping our communities, so they support the health and well-being of people of all ages and abilities, even through the cold and icy weather:

- **Walk audits:** A walk audit can help identify ways to improve the usability of a community for people other than those who use vehicles for transportation. A walk audit tool helps collect information about street conditions, quality of sidewalks and crosswalks, and time allotted for pedestrians crossing large traffic intersections. This information can help highlight particular aspects of a built environment that could be improved upon to allow more community members to be active in their neighborhoods. There are many versions of walk audits available for anyone to use; [the AARP Walk Audit Tool Kit](#) is one great example.
- **City planning:** Vermont cities and towns each have planning and community development plans. These plans address a variety of topics, such as housing, city

revitalization efforts, business development, and walkability of streets. City planning meetings are often open to the public. Attend local planning meetings to become more familiar with local policies and planning efforts. This is also an opportunity to educate city officials on the importance of safe and accessible community infrastructure including:

- Wide, stable sidewalks,
- Good lighting in downtown areas, and
- Curb cuts with smooth transitions allows people with disabilities to navigate a town more easily and safely.

Such accessibility features not only support people with disabilities to be more active and engaged in their community year-round, but also older adults and people with strollers.

- **Shared use agreements:** Work with community businesses and public institutions to develop shared use agreements. Shared use agreements allow central locations such as schools or other municipal buildings to be open during hours they would otherwise not be in use (such as late afternoons, early mornings, or weekends). This provides all community members a safe, warm space to engage in physical activity during the winter months, such as walking or use of the gym.
- **Winter maintenance policies:** Navigating snow-covered sidewalks, parking lots, and curb cuts with a mobility limitation can be challenging, if not impossible. Vermont cities and towns often have winter maintenance plans and policies. Connect with Vermont Agency of Transportation and your local Department of Public Works to learn about the policies in place in your town and educate select boards on the need for clear, accessible pathways and routes of travel.

Winter weather will be arriving soon. The way we design and maintain our communities – our built environments – can support all people in finding ways to stay active through the colder months of the year. Not only will accessible community design support people with disabilities in staying active, but it will support all community members in staying healthy and more active. Wishing everyone a safe and movement-filled start to the winter season!

¹Source: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2016