

ISSUE REPORT

Investing In America's Health:

A STATE-BY-STATE LOOK AT PUBLIC HEALTH
FUNDING AND KEY HEALTH FACTS



MARCH 2012

PREVENTING EPIDEMICS.
PROTECTING PEOPLE.

PREVENTION IN ACTION

San Antonio: A Community Making Healthy Choices

By Maggie Thompson, Health Program Manager, San Antonio Metropolitan Health District

San Antonio is a great community. We have a mayor who cares deeply about health and a community that, when given the opportunity, will strive to be healthier.

In the last two years, the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District (Metro Health) through the Communities Putting Prevention to Work grant has created around 30 initiatives that help make the healthy choice the easier choice.

We increased access to healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity, and we've worked on changing the built environment so that parks and community and residential areas are supportive of a healthy lifestyle. We recently passed a Complete Streets ordinance that requires new city-sponsored streets to provide support for bikes and pedestrians.

We have also partnered with city departments, such as the Library, the Planning Department, Public Works, the Office of Environmental Policy, and the Parks Department to improve health.

Through the Parks Department, "Fitness in the Park" provides free classes to city residents, including Yoga, Zumba, boot camps and other exercise classes. In addition, we placed outdoor fitness stations in 25 parks. When the National Recreation and Parks Association came to view our program, San Antonians went up and thanked them, thinking they had provided the resources – our community was that appreciative of the fitness stations. Since we installed the outdoor fitness stations, park use has gone up.

With the local Independent School Districts, we've put 108 salad bars in schools, which reach 100,000 students. We've provided physical activity equipment to 365 schools to ensure 350,000 students are moving, active, and understand the importance of healthy behaviors. We have also placed health assessment stations, outdoor fitness equipment and walking trails on the grounds of local libraries. Families can enjoy both reading and physical activity.

In addition, San Antonio became the first city in Texas to have a Bike Share program thanks to collaboration between Metro Health and the Office of Environmental Policy. Now, Austin and Houston are modeling similar initiatives after ours. We established

a Ride-to-Own bicycle program which has flourished in underserved communities and provided over 1200 bicycles to residents.

By working with the Mayor's office and other city departments, we've made health a community movement. Mayor Julián Castro established a Mayor's Fitness Council and has heavily promoted these initiatives. This gives our programs more community support and awareness.

The community spirit is evident during *Síclovia*, a free event that temporarily makes selected San Antonio streets available to residents for recreational and sports activities so participants can bike, run, skateboard, etc. without worrying about cars. Because our first *Síclovia* was so popular, we were approached by Fiesta San Antonio to incorporate a health focus. Fiesta is the city's week-long celebration each year with festivals, parades and numerous activities.

We are launching a "Fit Fiesta" to allow people access to healthy activities and foods. While this is a small step, it is an encouraging move toward making one of our biggest community gatherings healthier. *Síclovia* will be a pre-Fiesta event to kick off a Fit Fiesta.

We've found that if we provide the community with ways to be healthy and exercise, they will enthusiastically use these resources. While we've had great accomplishments, we need to keep up the momentum.

This is a start, it is incredibly important to change the attitude of residents to give them opportunities. If they have few options, they are more likely to stay inside – it's as simple as that.

By focusing on preventive initiatives, we provide wonderful opportunities to improve the health of the community.

