



Fitchburg, MA

▲ Community Example from Chapter 3 of "Lessons for Leaders:"
Lessons in Community Engagement for Equity

Community Background

Fitchburg is a blue-collar city of 40,000 residents in north-central Massachusetts. Unemployment is high, and single-parent families now account for 40 percent of households. In addition, 21 percent of Fitchburg's children live in poverty, and the city has a relatively high percent of foreign-born and non-English-speaking residents. Yet Fitchburg's top political leadership, government officials and nonprofit agencies are recognized as leaders within the state for their response to health disparities and economic challenges. The Fun 'n FITchburg (FnF) initiative has been a centerpiece of this high-profile effort and has helped move the city forward. Active partners span many community sectors and include professionals, the mayor, city council, youth and residents. FnF began as a vehicle to address childhood obesity and evolved into a collaborative model for tackling the significant issues of health and economic equity. Fitchburg embraces and capitalizes on its diversity through an inclusive community action approach.

Community Action

Montachusett Opportunity Council, Inc. (MOC), the lead agency for *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities* (HKHC), coordinated FnF from its inception. The agency structured FnF to maximize Fitchburg's many skills, voices and perspectives by creating the Community Mobilization Network, a collaborative of more than 85 stakeholders. FnF began with a community assessment and partnership development period that included six youth peer leaders who represented the three low-income priority neighborhoods. Assessment activities included policy-maker interviews, walking and park audits, Photovoice and focus groups of youth and parents.

The organizers purposely scheduled regular meetings at times when youth could attend. Youth peer leaders also held their own regular meetings after school to plan and conduct FnF project work in an atmosphere that was comfortable for them. Peer leaders led several FnF projects, including park audits and cleanups, and they helped form the city's Adopt-a-Park program, which is now a permanent city program.

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Although youth involvement was a high priority and success, resident and parent involvement was a challenge early in the initiative. While adult residents' input was highly valued, their participation was lacking. In response, FnF organizers paid resident mobilizers, two bilingual and bicultural parents who were culturally reflective of residents in the priority neighborhoods and who also became part of the FnF Steering Committee. Trained in advocacy, policy change and leadership, they increased resident participation in FnF activities, such as recruiting residents for the Adopt-a-Park program. Because of their language skills, relationships and understanding of FnF goals, the resident mobilizers became effective liaisons in public housing and low-income neighborhoods. In fact, their work resulted in the formal adoption of 16 Fitchburg parks and built greater trust between residents, city government and other local organizations.