IMPACT IN MINNESOTA
BUILDING COALITIONS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC HEALTH

One way to encourage children and youth to be more physically active, and thereby helping to reduce obesity rates, is to make sure they can exercise safely, particularly in low-income minority communities. This is the central premise of the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) movement. Funded by the federal transportation bill, SRTS helps communities make it safer for students to walk and bike to school. The program is so popular in Minnesota that yearly funding requests have outstripped available dollars by as much as 5 to 1.

This demand, combined with a reduction in federal funding for the SRTS program as well as changes in the way that funding is allocated, caused a broad coalition of health advocates in Minnesota to begin a campaign in 2012 to fund a Minnesota-based SRTS program.

“The Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota reached out to the Minnesotans for Healthy Kids Coalition to partner on establishing a state Safe Routes to School program,” says Rachel Callanan, regional vice president of advocacy for the American Heart Association’s Midwest Affiliate. “We knew from the federal funding applications that demand was strong. We tapped this unmet demand to build a strong coalition.”

The coalition behind the Minnesota-based SRTS program included nearly 40 organizations, ranging from the American Heart Association to the Minnesota Medical Association to the Minnesota PTA to St. Paul Promise Neighborhood—a 250-square block area in St. Paul in which 80 percent of the residents are from communities of color. The coalition proved to be a strong voice and a powerful presence, and as a result, in 2012, the Minnesota Legislature established an SRTS program, which was left unfunded due to a significant state budget shortfall.

Even though Minnesota continued to face a budget shortfall in 2013, coalition-backed legislation to fund the Minnesota SRTS program was reintroduced. Coalition members argued persuasively that making it safer for kids to walk and bike to school was a significant investment that would yield high returns for Minnesota. With bipartisan support as well as support from the governor, the legislature provided $500,000 over two years for non-infrastructure SRTS needs, such as planning, mapping, and training.

That’s when a grant from Voices for Healthy Kids came into play. The funding was used to hire a legislative campaign coordinator and a communications coordinator for the 2014 session. Through a targeted communications campaign, the two worked in concert with American Heart Association staff to build public and legislative support for infrastructure funding. Part of the organizing effort resulted in Mission Readiness—an organization of retired generals and admirals dedicated to improving the health of youth and thereby strengthening the nation’s armed forces—submitting a guest editorial in support of the Minnesota SRTS funding effort. The editorial ran in several key Minnesota newspapers.

“The grant from Voices for Healthy Kids afforded us the opportunity to build our coalition’s reach, expand our communications and messaging, and strengthen Minnesota’s Safe Routes to School movement. Without these resources, we would have been stuck in a reactive mode, rather than driving the change we wanted to see,” says Callanan.

Although competition in the 2014 legislative session was fierce—there was $2.8 billion in bonding requests for the $850 million the legislature was willing to invest—the legislature approved $1 million for SRTS infrastructure funding. It also increased funding by $250,000 per year for non-infrastructure spending.

Health advocates in Minnesota believe that the creation of a Minnesota-based SRTS program, and funding for both planning and infrastructure development, will result in more students walking and biking, both of which will have significant impacts on obesity. The dollars approved for the program will potentially improve the safety of tens of thousands of Minnesota school students, including many from the state’s African-American and Latino communities.