



# ANCHOR

ACCELERATING NATIONAL COMMUNITY HEALTH OUTCOMES THROUGH REINFORCING PARTNERSHIPS

## AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION: HITTING THE STREETS, ENGAGING PEOPLE, CREATING CHANGE



A key way to improve community health is to build policy, systems and environmental improvements. By modifying and shaping physical landscapes –making the healthy choice the easy choice and changing the areas in which people live – people begin to see positive health outcomes. But the work all begins with the individual. The American Heart Association is working with and within communities by building the capacity of staff and collaborators to hit the streets and engage the public in implementing innovative, effective capacity-building initiatives. Through this work, champions can connect with individuals, gather personal stories, and find the most effective personalized approaches for communities.

### The Challenge

Chronic diseases are responsible for seven of ten deaths each year in the United States, and account for more than 80 percent of the nation's health care costs annually. Heart disease, obesity, cancer and diabetes often are caused by or worsened by factors such as poor nutrition, physical inactivity, and tobacco smoke. But too often the cold hard facts and statistics only tell one part of the story. To effectively make change, and to grab the public's attention and show them why they should care, people have to feel connected to stories and experiences.



**“By authentically connecting face-to-face with people in priority communities, we move closer to ‘doing with’ and away from ‘doing for.’”**

- Lori Fresina, Senior Vice President & New England Office Director, M+R

## The Solution

Chronic diseases are among the most common and costly health problems, but they also are among the most preventable. However, data can only go so far in encouraging people to become invested in prevention. A story is often more persuasive. Personal narratives engage people and gather support for the necessary policy, system, and environmental changes. At a recent training session, American Heart Association staff working on the Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program had the opportunity to learn how to talk to and engage the public, and how to gather personal stories. Using both classroom discussion and hands-on experience, the team surveyed dozens of people in street interviews. Leaders came away with real-world examples and real-life experiences to apply to their work.

## Sustaining Success: Policy, System and Environmental Change

The changes involved in transforming communities through policy, systems and environmental improvements go beyond telling individual people how to be healthy—they make being healthy feasible for all people within a community. The American Heart Association is maximizing its public health impact by promoting interventions that influence populations. The goal is to build a groundswell of community support and demonstrate practices other communities can replicate. But the work of impacting entire communities often begins with engaging individual leaders. It means engaging the public, collaborators and other leaders on the issues that matter to their community to build sustainable solutions. So, the AHA is providing its staff with tools and training to hit the streets, gather personal stories, and garner support for their causes.

## Results

At a recent training event in Washington D.C., the ANCHOR Partnerships Program team learned through classroom discussion and hands-on experience the importance of “hitting the streets.” The team helped shape a series of survey questions, discussed how to “hook” people on the street, and worked out the logistics such as location and recording responses. The American Heart Association Regional Campaign Managers, along with a guest participant from the National WIC Association, separated into six teams and headed out to talk to people around our nation’s capital. During a two-hour period, the teams approached 107 people and asked them to participate in the survey, and 62 people accepted.

The groups engaged with a wide-array of individuals - locals and non-locals, young and old, men and women. Beyond the data, the most memorable moments were the poignant personal stories. Of the participants, 41 shared some response when asked if someone in their life had been effected by a chronic disease. One person’s father was a chain smoker and mother was a non-smoker; the mother got lung disease, likely from secondhand smoke. Another person’s grandfather was overweight and died too young from a heart attack. Real people have real stories, and those stories are powerful agents of change.

The team came back after hitting the streets with renewed purpose. Beforehand, almost everyone was dreading the exercise. Afterwards, almost everyone said it was absolutely worth doing, with many planning to replicate the exercise at home. While it may be intimidating to talk to strangers, it is a critical part of public health work. Talking with individuals is a great way to gather information; identify new grassroots advocates; and find powerful personal stories. The experience allows advocates to work with a community, not just for a community.

## Get Involved

Public health champions must remember that policy, systems, and environmental changes can shape entire landscapes and modify community laws – but individuals should never be forgotten. Champions, leaders and community volunteers are encouraged to hit the streets, gather personal stories, and engage the public to increase the impact of the changes they are working so hard to achieve.