

Making streets safer across the United States

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A woman and two children wearing helmets use a marked pedestrian crossing with their bikes © American Heart Association

In some nations around the globe, walking and cycling are part of everyday life and culture. In others, cars are the norm. As part of our mission to be a relentless force for a world of longer healthier lives, the American Heart Association supports cities and states in the U.S. making policy changes for healthier communities. One of our leading initiatives, Voices for Healthy Kids, focuses on childhood health and works to create active environments as reflected in the Global Action Plan on Physical Activity.

On October 16, 2018, the City of Milwaukee passed the most recent city-wide complete streets policy that will make getting around the city safer for its residents and visitors. The law's passage represents an exciting win in a larger movement sweeping the nation to ensure that everyone can benefit from complete streets – roads designed and built to be shared for all users – people walking, riding bicycles, using public transit and driving cars. The momentum witnessed across the US could help provide insight to civil society partners on how this policy is being implemented across sectors and different settings.

Setting the Stage: The Importance of Complete Streets

Complete streets policies guide local and state governments in building and redesigning roads that allow safe and convenient travel for everyone who uses them. When streets are designed and built to share with protected bikes lanes, sidewalks, crosswalks and curb ramps, there are fewer car crashes – drivers, and people walking and riding bicycles are all safer.

These policies can help to not only reduce the number of traffic injuries, but also provide more opportunities for people to be physically active. When children can safely walk to school, parks and other activities, they are more likely to be healthy. Simply put, an investment in complete streets is an investment in safe, healthy communities and an investment in the next generation.

Forward Progress: A Nationwide Movement

Complete streets policies make communities and neighbourhoods more liveable by ensuring people can safely get where they need – to work, school, the library, grocery store, restaurants and shopping destinations. The good news is that [30 states and Washington, D.C. have adopted complete streets policies](#) [1]; however, only 17 of those have policies that go deeper with clear requirements for action. Thankfully, organizations across the country are working to resolve this issue. Read below to learn more about the recent successes in Milwaukee and other complete streets campaigns:

Milwaukee, WI

The Complete Streets Coalition – made up of organizations including 16th Street Community Health Centres, Layton Boulevard West Neighbors, Northwest Side CDC, Black Girls Do Bike, American Heart Association, the Wisconsin Bike Fed and many others – led the charge in seeing the Milwaukee legislation over the finish line. Developed with input from residents and community leaders, the legislation emphasized helping historically neglected communities.

“Milwaukee is a majority-minority city, so having minority voices to identify the issues and provide feedback and support was key to this being a campaign that focused on equity,” said Jessica Wineberg, Deputy Director of Wisconsin Bike Fed.

With the passage of the complete streets policy, Wineberg hopes that the changes will create safer, more active communities and unify neighbourhoods across the city. The coalition continues to work with city leadership on internal policies and procedures to effectively implement complete streets, including how to best engage the public and train employees on the nuances of making streets safe to share for all users.

“Streets are the backbone of a community and they play a role in economic and physical health,” Wineberg explained. “I hope that by having complete streets, our community can be healthier, local businesses can thrive, neighbours can meet, and people can safely and enjoyably get around their neighbourhood independently, regardless of age or ability.”

Oklahoma City, OK

Another exciting success occurred earlier this year in Oklahoma City. On January 16, the Oklahoma City Council adopted a Livable Streets policy that will help ensure that residents have access to safe and secure roads.

The team started by building a new advocate base focused on recruiting city residents with an interest in health, exercise, biking, running, and general fitness and introducing them to complete streets. The team also partnered with former Mayor Mick Cornett to promote the importance of physical activity.

Similar to the campaign in Milwaukee, the coalition wanted to ensure that the needs of people with low- to moderate-incomes were heard and understood. In Oklahoma City, some low-income communities and communities of colour have lacked well-maintained routes to parks and schools, roads, bike lanes, and sidewalks for decades.

“The policy will guide improvements to the city’s infrastructure and ensure that complete sidewalks and bike lanes are built in all neighbourhoods, especially those that are traditionally not invested in,” said Naomi Amaha, Community Advocacy Director at the American Heart Association.

New Orleans, LA

In New Orleans, the Bike Easy team is working on building community support for a revision of the city’s current complete streets policy. According to Campaign Manager Robert Henig Bell, the existing policy does not adequately address the needs of the community.

"New Orleans, its surrounding area, and the state of Louisiana rank far too high in two very meaningful rankings: the safety of our roadways and our 'quality of life,'" explained Bell. "Complete streets is a powerful tool we can employ to improve both so that our daily travels are safe, affordable and accessible to all."

New Orleans has a long-standing bicycling culture, with many community members using it as a means of commuting to work and school. By advocating for protected bike lanes, Bell and his team believe all residents will benefit if the whole community comes to see commuting by bike as a safe and reasonable transportation option.

"For much of the 20th century, people who biked to work often seemed invisible, but in the 21st we need to make sure we're focused on improving the safety of everyone: people biking to work, women, children, and any other residents who might struggle with access to a safe, affordable route to where they need to go," said Bell.

Bike Easy is making important strides to bring a better quality of life to people throughout New Orleans with a clear, comprehensive complete streets policy.

Help Inspire Change in Your Community

The American Heart Association recognises that health and wellness are influenced by the places in which people live, learn, work and play. It has developed toolkits around key policy areas that help to foster a culture of health. We invite you to help mobilize a similar campaign in your community, by visiting our **Streets Built to Share** [Complete Streets toolkit](#). [2] Within our toolkit, you will find helpful information on how to build out your own advocacy efforts aimed at developing policies that support the planning, design and maintenance of safe and convenient streets for all.

About the author

The **American Heart Association** ([@American_Heart](#) [3]) believes everyone should live longer, healthier lives. With the support of more than 22 million passionate supporters and volunteers, key partners and a global network of relationships with leading scientists and like-minded organizations, AHA delivers lifesaving information and programs into clinical facilities, businesses, schools and homes in over 80 countries. The American Heart Association has worked internationally for decades to extend our impact into more countries to help us save more lives around the world.

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