



SAFE
ROUTES TO
PARKS



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PARTNERSHIP

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Connecting State and Local Safe Routes to Parks Work: A Colorado Case Study

State agencies have a significant role in influencing the funding and policy that affects local park access. The Safe Routes Partnership set out to work with states to establish collaboration between agencies whose work impacts local park access and build on opportunities for active transportation to all community destinations.

The Safe Routes Partnership recruited six states over two years from a pool of 13 applicants to work on the internal systems that could support local park access. During that time, we also worked with two of those states, Colorado and Pennsylvania, to build a cohort of local partners elevating community power and momentum to improve local park access. Below is a summary of our approach with examples from Colorado and key takeaways from the experience for both state and local participants. The strategies and outcomes outlined can act as a model for other states to take on this important work as a tool for increasing physical activity, safety, and connectivity throughout communities.

Applying Systems Change to State Agencies *An Overview of the Indicators of Readiness*

When determining states to work with, we identified a list of characteristics of state agencies that indicated their ability to participate in a 12-month technical assistance program, willingness to craft and implement impactful Safe Routes to Parks strategies, and sustain forward momentum after the program's completion. We framed this all within a systems change framework, which you can read more about in *Shaping Equitable Park Access: A Systems Approach to Safe Route and Long-Term Change*.

Table 1 summarizes these indicators by defining the indicator, how it corresponds to an element(s) of systems change, how we “measured” that indicator, and an example of how that showed up in Colorado. These indicators became the framework to select states to participate in our program. We use Colorado as an example because they were a 2023 program participant, and we went on to support local work with them in 2024.



Primos Park Roll 'n Stroll Audit (Boulder, CO)



A community site visit with state and local agencies (Wellington, CO)



Readiness Indicators for State Agencies		
Indicator	Evidenced By	Colorado Example
A Foundation to Build on With Room to Improve	Using Making Strides: 2022 State Report Cards we identified states with room to grow particularly in the state and federal funding category as well as signs of an open and innovative approach to increasing safety.	In the 2022 State Report Cards, Colorado scored 130 out of 200 points, putting it into the second-highest category, “Making Strides.”
Public Health Interest and Leadership	States involved in CDC-funded programs focused on improving health through physical activity such as State Physical Activity and Nutrition (SPAN), High Obesity Program (HOP), and Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH)	Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) was a SPAN recipient from 2018 to 2023 .
State and Local Interest in Improving Park Access	Tracked news stories via google alerts to watch what work was happening across the country on park access and how states as well as local communities were talking about active transportation and park access	Some efforts in Colorado to increase outdoor access include the Colorado Public Health Parks and Recreation Collaborative and Great Outdoors Colorado .
Established Cross-Agency Partnerships	Participation in collaborative initiatives and successful outcomes of joint agencies’ efforts such as a formal memorandum of understanding between agencies or adopted plans/metrics that call for cross-agency collaboration	CDPHE and CDOT worked together on a variety of projects related to activity-friendly routes to everyday destinations such as a Community Engagement Toolkit .
SRTP Primary Contact(s) and their Role in Decision-Making	The primary contact’s role in the organizational chart and who they report to; track record or past examples of shaping or influencing organizational systems are essential to project success.	The main program contact was working in the built environment program at CDPHE. They were focused on walking and biking to everyday destinations so this project was a great fit.
Signs of Adaptability and Innovation	We looked at how agencies responded and shifted their practices, planning, and implementation to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic; staff dedicated to cross-sector work within departments; and, diversified and/or creative funding.	CDOT’s Revitalizing Main Streets program invests in active transportation connections to main streets and began as part of the state’s COVID-19 recovery plan. After initial success, the state legislature allocated 10 years of funding to the program in 2021.
Commitment to equity and community engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Equity is clearly defined in the organization’s policies, mission, and values; present in key documents and processes that influence the organization’s funding and programming decisions; and, is incorporated into goals or metrics. ▶ Established committees with robust community representation ▶ Established language accessibility plan and practices 	CDOT’s statewide transportation plan , commits to address public health and environmental justice. State legislation, SB21-260 Sustainability of the Transportation System , established a new branch in CDOT that works directly with disproportionately impacted communities to identify barriers that prevent them from fully participating in decisions that impact health and quality of life.
Institutional commitments that support SRTP	Written commitments and existing state or regional plans and/or policies that support SRTP either explicitly or more broadly. For instance, the adoption of a state Complete Streets policy that supports safe walking, rolling, and biking to everyday destinations.	In 2018, the Department of Natural Resource (DNR) established a Trails and Recreation Council to increase equitable access to parks, trails, and open space.



Advancing Safe Routes to Parks in Colorado

In Colorado, we worked with a team of three staff members from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE), Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), and Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW). In fall 2022, we selected their application, which was led by CDPHE. We worked with them through the fall of 2023 to identify opportunities and refine how Safe Routes to Parks could work in the state. Beginning in fall 2023, we partnered with that state team to create and launch an

State-Level Accomplishments

PLANS/POLICIES



ACTIONS

- ▶ Reviewed policy opportunities in statewide plans
- ▶ Incorporated Safe Routes to Parks in data collection for the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) and Safe Routes to School (SRTS) plan updates
- ▶ Reviewed and provided recommendations for the CO Complete Street Policy and Procedural directive
- ▶ Created a living state-level Safe Routes to Parks Action Plan



OUTCOMES

- ▶ Integrated public health, active transportation, safe routes, multi-modal transportation, and inclusive play into the update for SCORP.
- ▶ Safe Routes to Parks included in Statewide SRTS plan
- ▶ Parks were included as a frequent destination for bicyclists and pedestrians and included as a key data component for active transportation and Complete Streets prioritization

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



ACTIONS

- ▶ Integrated the Colorado Engagement Toolkit into the Safe Routes to Parks Equity and Engagement Training
- ▶ Leveraged CDC SPAN grant funds to provide additional funding for community engagement activities



OUTCOMES

- ▶ Local advocates incentivized to do thoughtful community engagement
- ▶ Community-engaged early actions in all four Safe Routes to Parks communities



application for local-level organizations to receive technical assistance and a small grant to do Safe Routes to Parks work.

The graphic below summarizes accomplishments from the past year led by the Colorado state team. These actions and their outcomes are categorized according to the different elements of systems change, showcasing the sophisticated and innovative approach of Colorado agencies to work together to advance park access in multiple ways.



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SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS AND BELIEFS



ACTIONS

- ▶ Presented about this work to the Colorado Public Health and Parks and Recreation network and invited them to participate in one of the early actions
- ▶ Required that there be a representative of the city/town staff to participate in Activating Communities



OUTCOMES

- ▶ Built out connections statewide
- ▶ Increased trust with local communities
- ▶ Boosted success of local advocates in implementing projects because of built-in government connection

ACTIONS

- ▶ Built a case study library of CO Safe Routes to Parks and active transportation projects from urban, suburban, and rural communities
- ▶ Shared case studies at APA CO conference



OUTCOMES

- ▶ Showing that this work can be done in many different contexts across the state
- ▶ Sharing ideas of what can be done



High-level Takeaways from Colorado

Here are some insights on what Colorado has taught us about advancing Safe to Routes to Parks in a state.

- ▶ **Be opportunistic and build on what you have:** Colorado had multiple plans due for an update such as their Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, Safe Routes to School Strategic Plan, and Active Transportation Plan. They also had been awarded a SPAN grant from CDC. All of these were opportunities to start a conversation about safe routes to everyday destinations, gather data about local needs, and include commitments for future work.
- ▶ **Use a variety of platforms to share:** We worked with the Colorado state team to build momentum by hosting webinars, writing short case studies, facilitating learning sessions such as the APA CO, and planning a workshop at the Safe Routes to School National Conference.
- ▶ **Find ways to incentivize engagement:** The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment was able to leverage SPAN engagement funds to provide additional funding on top of the \$10,000 participants already received for early implementation projects. Staff also updated the Colorado Safe Routes to School grant rubric to include more points for engagement trainings.
- ▶ **Show up for local communities:** When state staff showed up for workshops, events, or site visits, locals took note. Even joining technical assistance calls was a useful way to share expertise and inspire more motivation for this work.
- ▶ **Identify the desired outcome early and then use that to build collaboration:** Look for a specific goal first instead of getting wrapped up in finding the perfect way to work together. Use that shared goal to work on better collaboration and adjust as you go.
- ▶ **Clarify what is doable:** Working with states has generally been a slower process and depends heavily on individual willingness to go above and beyond their job description. From the beginning, try to understand what each staff member is willing and able to do to advance shared work

The Local Impact of State Support Local Success Stories

Feedback from participating communities underscored the importance of state-level participation. Anecdotally, we heard from communities that applied that they felt motivated to do so because of the involvement of the Colorado agencies. This sentiment continued to resound during the Safe Routes to Parks technical assistance program. In the final surveys, all respondents shared that they either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that, Ongoing participation and support from Colorado state agencies was helpful in moving our work forward.

Here is what we heard from local communities on specific ways state-level helped advance their work:

- ▶ State agencies helped communities develop strategies and solutions to overcome challenges to park access.
 - *“Their knowledge and resources were invaluable and helped us to build strategies and brainstorm around, broadening the possibilities of the work that we could do on our project immediately and in the future.”*
 - *“It was great to get feedback from multiple state and county agency reps. It’s usually hard to get all those organization reps together, but this project made it happen”*
- ▶ State agencies made valuable contributions by attending in-person site visits and actively participating in the action plan workshop.



- “The site visit with three state employees gave us invaluable expertise on the types of access problems, solutions, and costs we could consider; and their participation in the workshop helped us collaborate effectively with our transportation department.”
- ▶ State agencies helped promote funding opportunities and support communities to apply.
 - “Providing letters of support for additional grant funding to pursue multi-modal improvements.”
- ▶ State agencies connected local communities to the right people and contacts.
 - “[Their] connections within the ‘industry’ was incredibly helpful. For example, when we had a question about a Union Pacific Rail crossing, [they were] able to get us a real person on the phone within days!”

When asked about ways that the state agencies can continue to support and sustain their work, community participants identified sharing resources on grants and funding opportunities; continued thought partnership to brainstorm challenges when they arise; connecting them with the right people; and developing a community of practice of parks, transportation, and health working towards joint solutions.

Here is one example of how a community participating in the Colorado Safe Routes to Parks program addressed the unique opportunities for this work with support from state staff.

Partners Make a Case for Investments to Park Access with Painted Streets (Wheat Ridge, CO)

In November 2023, Wheat Ridge residents passed a half-cent sales tax to fund bicycle, pedestrian, and stormwater infrastructure improvements. To help the city steward these new funds, the local bike advocacy group, Bike Jeffco worked closely with city parks and recreation staff, using the Safe Routes to Parks program to help identify possible improvements to improve safety on key corridors connecting parks and schools.

This collaborative process highlighted a range of strategies to enhance safety and reduce car speeds. To showcase the potential of the new bond funding, the team worked with residents to create vibrant asphalt art on a busy street linking two schools and a local park. The colorful designs not only “daylighted” crosswalks—making them more visible—but also deterred drivers from parking too close, improving pedestrian safety. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment provided additional funding to support more robust community engagement. CDPHE staff also coordinated with the state-wide group, [Colorado Public Health and Parks and Recreation Collaborative](#), to bring members from other Colorado



A painted mural “daylights” the crosswalk (Wheat Ridge, CO)



Volunteers prepare the asphalt with primer (Wheat Ridge, CO)



communities to support and learn from the block painting event. This could act as a model for other communities to do similar events in the future.

The demonstration underscored the community's desire for safety improvements near parks and schools, guiding the city on how to effectively use the recently approved bond funding for biking and walking enhancements. Ultimately, the bond money is limited so state staff joined in an action planning workshop to present on state funding opportunities through CDPHE, CDOT, and DNR so that Wheat Ridge could maximize their money. The process also revealed opportunities for broader policy changes, such as revisiting speed limits in these areas and establishing a clear policy for crosswalk installations—key initiatives for the city's long-term plans.

The Bottom Line

Connecting state resources more directly with local connectivity and access priorities is a powerful way to build local capacity and momentum for safer, more connected communities. State agencies should consider applying this learning and taking on similar activities based on what is within their sphere of influence. As shown in this Colorado program, even small steps like surveys or attending a local workshop can have a big impact!

