The Little Sidewalk That Could… Lead to Better Health

By Gayle Shirley
Lewis and Clark Public Health

A hardy huddle of Helenans braved snow and cold this month to celebrate the installation of a short stretch of sidewalk on the east end of town. The new walkways connect Prospect and 11th Avenues on either side of Fee Street, near Albertsons and Days Inn.

As a TV camera rolled, the mayor donned a hardhat and snipped a blue ribbon officially “opening” the sidewalks. Behind him stood beaming volunteers and professionals in city planning, transportation, and public health, all of whom had worked together to get the sidewalk project done.

While a ribbon-cutting might seem like overkill for just a few blocks of concrete, those in attendance recognized the importance of that sidewalk to the public’s health and safety. And they knew that it extends far beyond a couple of blocks.

The Built Environment

Sidewalks are an example of the “built environment,” which encompasses all human-made parts of where we live, recreate, and work – like homes, buildings, streets, bridges, and open spaces. The built environment has become the focus of a national movement in recent years that’s brought together public health, engineering, and community design.

A growing body of research shows that the built environment can impact health as much as diet or medical care. It influences levels of physical activity, social connectivity, and access to needed services.

In the case of the Fee Street sidewalks, residents of Eagles Manor and the surrounding neighborhood will now be able to walk to the grocery store, PureView Health Center, and other locations without having to risk their lives dodging traffic. That means they’ll enjoy better access to health care and fresh food. They’ll also find it easier to meet and greet workers and neighbors, reducing their risk of isolation and loneliness.

According to Blue Zones, a company that researches and promotes ways to live long and healthy lives: “There is no better full health indicator than the degree to which a community is fully walkable. Walkable streets and neighborhoods… determine how often we take walks or go outside, how
connected we feel to nature, how much we feel engaged and involved with others, how likely we are to volunteer, and influence many other positive health indicators.”

**Collaborating for Concrete Results**

In recent years, a local collaboration has flourished among planners, engineers, public health professionals, and advocates, including representatives of the Montana Independent Living Project and Bike Walk Helena. These partners have melded their expertise to collaborate on projects, share knowledge, and offer trainings and technical assistance.

As part of this effort, Lewis and Clark Public Health brought in a national “walkability” expert last spring to demonstrate how to conduct “walk audits.” These are a tool used to gather information about the built environment in a particular neighborhood. They can be as simple as taking a walk to assess street conditions and document barriers that hinder use by people of all ages and abilities.

Walk audits have helped to inspire a handful of new infrastructure projects in Helena.

In addition to the sidewalks on Fee, you probably noticed the significant changes to Neill and Fuller Avenues on the north end of downtown. They included a raised intersection that’s meant to help calm traffic and more clearly and safely direct pedestrian movement. Walk audits also were used to plan the recent improvements to Front Street.

The responsibility for improving health in Lewis and Clark County has always extended far beyond the walls of Lewis and Clark Public Health. This collaboration has been a successful example of how unexpected partnerships can lead to creative solutions to address community health needs.

We couldn’t do it alone.

*Gayle Shirley is the communications and systems improvement manager for Lewis and Clark Public Health in Helena. You can reach her at publichealth@lccountymt.gov.*