

Increasing Active Living among people with mobility disabilities

This brief highlights and summarizes research from a 2012 study conducted by Basia Belza, PhD, RN, FAAN, and Dori Rosenberg, PhD, MPH, at the Health Promotion Research Center at the University of Washington.

Many mid-life and older adults with mobility disabilities can maintain their health and independence if current barriers in the built environment are addressed. The built environment is best described as the human-made space in which people live, work, and recreate.¹ Improvements in the built environment positively impact neighborhood-based activity for everyone.

***Ms. Jones' Story.** If Ms. Jones had known she was going to have a stroke at the age of 72, she would have lived in a different place. Why? Because the physical consequences of her stroke, combined with the design of her neighborhood, made it hard for her to be part of her community.*

Ms. Jones was an active woman who enjoyed yoga and hiking, but her stroke left her with left-sided weakness and foot drop. Determined to stay active, Ms. Jones adapted. She uses a rolling walker to walk more safely and modified her house, replacing the front step with a ramp and placing grab bars in the bathroom. However, Ms. Jones' neighborhood was not designed to accommodate her needs and continues to limit her independence.

What can you do?

TAKE ACTION!

- ▶ Report poor sidewalks and curb cuts to the city.
- ▶ Join a neighborhood organization working to enhance the built environment (e.g. Feet First).
- ▶ Maintain the sidewalk in front of your home.

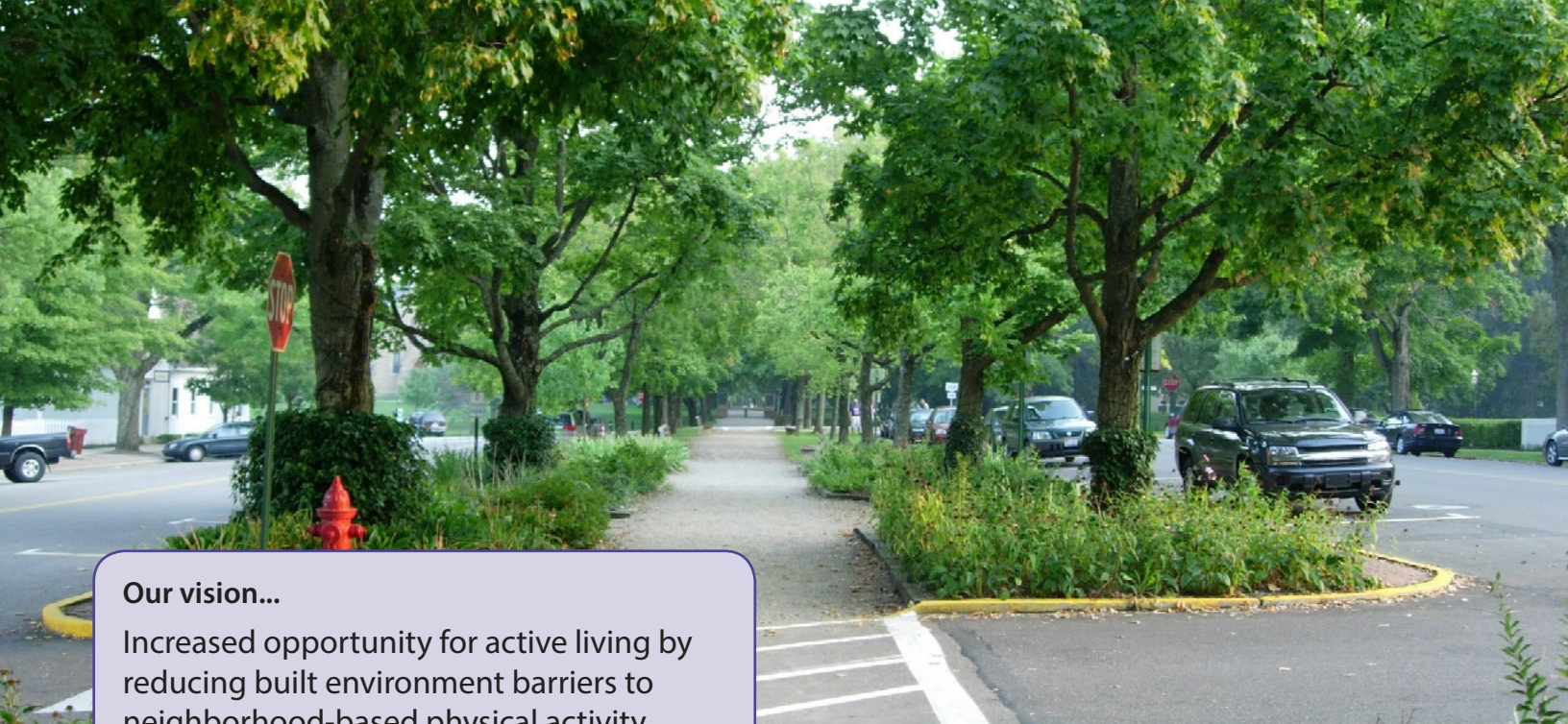
What We Can Accomplish

When the built environment is supportive, individuals like Ms. Jones can use the outdoors for useful purposes, like getting food and running errands, and physical activity. This is important because physical activity promotes mental, cognitive, physical, and emotional well-being which helps people stay independent.

Recent Research on the Built Environment

Among 35 adults over age 50 that used assistive devices (such as canes, walkers and wheelchairs), in-depth interviews uncovered barriers and facilitators to neighborhood-based physical activity.

¹ Roof, K; Oleru N. (2008). Public Health: Seattle and King County's Push for the Built Environment. *J Environ Health* 71: 24-27.



Our vision...

Increased opportunity for active living by reducing built environment barriers to neighborhood-based physical activity.

What Needs to be Done

- **Curb ramps need to be prevalent along sidewalks.** When there is no curb ramp, people have to walk or wheel in the street.
- **Curb ramps need to be in good condition.** Some common dangers include ramps being too steep, covered with debris, or leading to the street where there is not a crosswalk.
- **Crosswalks are needed.** Long stretches without crosswalks force longer routes which may make the trip impossible or encourage jaywalking.
- **Crosswalks must be well-marked and have clear views of oncoming traffic.** Being visible is important for all pedestrians, but particularly if someone has mobility restrictions.
- **Adequate time to cross the crosswalk.** Often, the time is inadequate, particularly for those who may move more slowly. Getting stuck in an intersection puts people in stressful and potentially dangerous situations.
- **Sidewalks are needed.** When there is no sidewalk, people have to dangerously walk or wheel in the street.
- **Sidewalks need to be in good condition.** Uneven surfaces, due to trees, potholes, cracks, driveways, or debris, are dangerous.
- **Stairs need handrails.** If the route includes stairs, a handrail is needed to support those able to climb with assistance.
- **Frequent benches with overhead shelter to protect people from heat, cold, or rain are needed.** People may be able to be more mobile if they have opportunity to rest along the trip.

Built Environment Improvements Benefit All

People with disabilities face many built environment barriers, but everyone can benefit from a healthy built environment. It can reduce risks for injury, promote healthy behavior, prevent falls, and prevent accidents with vehicles.

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HPRC is a research center at the University of Washington School of Public Health. For more information about the Built Environment, Accessibility and Mobility Study, see <http://depts.washington.edu/hprc/beam-study>. This work was funded by the CDC Prevention Research Centers Program.