

## Safe Routes for Seniors

Alliance Mutual Aid Call Series  
October 26, 2011

Many Alliance organizations work on Safe Routes to School programs that encourage more kids to walk and bike to school. In 2003, advocates with Transportation Alternatives in New York City applied that concept to the aging population, launching their Safe Routes for Seniors initiative. The effort was the first program of its kind to address the unique needs of elderly pedestrians and consider the role of street design in maintaining good cardiovascular health in old age. On this call, Noah Budnick, deputy director for Transportation Alternatives, Ann Marie Doherty from the New York City Department of Transportation and Will Stoner with the New York state AARP explained how they built their programs and how they continue to move forward.

### Tips from Noah Budnick:



#### Seniors are a vulnerable — and growing — population

- In 2003, Transportation Alternatives turned its attention on New York City's seniors because they represented a vulnerable, but growing, population. Unlike other residents, Budnick explained, seniors are slower moving and often less visible to motorists. If they are struck by a car, older walkers are more likely to be more seriously injured or killed, too.

#### Safe Routes to School provided a clear campaign model

- TA was one of the first American advocacy organizations to embrace the Safe Routes to School concept, starting a program in the Bronx in the mid-1990s. The parallels for seniors was clear: Both programs focused on a vulnerable population in a specific area, whether it be around a school or near a senior center.
- Both programs, Budnick said, have a built-in constituency, too: family. "The biggest difference between seniors and kids is that seniors vote," Budnick said.
- And both programs, while focused on a specific constituency, benefit the whole community. "If you make it safe for your grandparents to cross the street, you're making it safe for everyone to cross the street," Budnick said.

#### Baseline research is essential to success

- To get its Safe Routes for Seniors program off the ground, TA received initial funding from the state Department of Health. The DOH was interested in encouraging more physical activity among seniors and identify the barriers that kept older residents from engaging in walking.
- TA's research investigated those barriers. "We took a hard look at the research — what's out there — and, for the most part, the data didn't exist," Budnick said. "So we set out to establish our own baseline and body of data to support making streets safer for older people."

#### A collaborative process is critical

- The advocates started their research in upper Manhattan. "That's a geographic area that had a high senior population and a high level of senior pedestrian fatalities," Budnick said. "But it's also a part of the city that's extremely well organized; there's a lot of civic infrastructure in place, so we wouldn't have to build the movement from the ground up."
- Local senior centers were key partners in the effort to collect data and input. "We had luncheons at senior centers, which was a great way to get an audience and interview them about what they like about walking and the barriers to being out on the street," Budnick said.



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- In addition to senior center directors, TA also worked with research fellows from a public health school who observed seniors on the streets and conducted surveys. Surveys were created in English, Spanish and Chinese.
- TA also made it a priority to create a collaborative process that sought and welcomed input from all members of the community. "It came down to making the time to identify leaders in the senior community, whether that was older people or directors of senior centers or health care providers, and tap into their diverse knowledge," Budnick said.
- TA did outreach to elected officials and community boards throughout the process, too. "We also did a lot of work with the media," Budnick said. "We probably had 15 to 20 mainstream media mentions through the development of the campaign... In the end, it resulted in massive community support for our specific neighborhood-based reports."

### Use data to bring forward specific recommendations

- TA released at least half-a-dozen reports that focused on specific neighborhoods and provided technical recommendations.
- One of the most important pieces of data was the calculation of seniors' walking speed. "That research had never been done," Budnick said. "For traffic engineers, the walking speed they use is 4 feet per second for an adult. Our research found that seniors were walking 2.5 feet per second. That's substantially slower, which means we need to rethink, at the very least, how long we give older people to get across the street... By adding a few seconds to walk signal, you can make a substantial difference in the experience of older people moving around the city."
- From its research, TA came up with the concept of Elder Districts. Not unlike a school zone or a historic district, the elder district represented an area with a high density of senior residents, senior centers or service providers — and a high rate of senior pedestrian injuries or fatalities. TA developed a set of recommendations, like strict ADA compliance and longer walking signals, for those areas.

### Take good policy up the chain to institutionalize new programs

- TA used the success and recommendations on the neighborhood level to lobby local officials to create a citywide program — and it worked. "In January 2008, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced that the city was adopting a Safe Routes for Seniors program, which was a tremendous success and something we're very proud of as an advocacy organization," Budnick said. "New York City was the first city in the country to do something like this, which says a lot about where our priorities are."
- That's not where TA's advocacy ended, though. They continue to work with neighborhoods in NYC and have taken their ideas even further up the political chain. "When we've had the opportunity to meet with US DOT Secretary Ray LaHood we've pitched him this idea as a federal program, which is not unlike Safe Routes to School." After all, Safe Routes to School started in New York City and Marin County as local programs, before it became a program in the last federal transportation bill.



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### Tips from Ann Marie Doherty:



#### Recognizing the prevalence of senior fatalities was a major wake-up call

- In New York City, senior pedestrians are killed at a disproportionate rate. While they made up just 12 percent of the walking population, they accounted for 36 percent of pedestrian deaths in 2000. When TA brought such statistics to the attention of the DOT with their Safe Routes for Seniors campaign, it made an impact. “This was a major wake up call to us that we needed to address this concern,” Doherty said.
- The DOT agreed with TA that the need was particularly pressing given demographic trends. “We know that the population continues to grow and we certainly need to address these concerns if we want seniors to want to stay in our great city.”

#### Start in the areas of greatest need

- Once the DOT committed to its “Safe Streets for Seniors” program in 2008 they identified the locations around the city where seniors faced the most difficult conditions — and, at the outset, focused their efforts there. “We mapped the senior pedestrian fatalities and severe injuries and did GIS-based analysis to focus in on the areas where seniors were the most at-risk in these types of crashes, as well as where senior populations were highest,” Doherty explained. “So we came up with 25 focus areas and started out with implementing one pilot program in each burrough.”
- Like TA, the DOT conducted interviews with stakeholders to assess that neighborhood’s challenges and needs. “We interviewed seniors on the streets about how they felt about specific intersections and safety and we certainly heard the same story over and over: pedestrians did not have enough time to get across the street,” Doherty said.

#### A wealth of design solutions can offer increased safety and comfort for seniors

- Based on that feedback, the DOT came up with a number of improvements, including: Pedestrians refuge islands; Modified signal timing adjusted to walking speeds of 3 feet per second; Road diets and narrowing of streets; Improved and refurbished road markings, including high-visibility crosswalks; Fixes to drainage problems, broken pedestrian ramps.
- To date, the DOT has completed improvements at 13 of the 25 focus areas and even beyond the focus areas, at 600 intersections across the city, signals have been adjusted so all users have more time to cross safely.
- It made a difference: Between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of senior pedestrian fatalities dropped from 36 percent to just 30 percent, Doherty said. The drops were even more significant in the focus areas, including a 19 percent reduction in crashes with injuries at the Brighton Beach location and 29 percent in the Bronx location.

#### Federal funding can help foot the bill

- The DOT capitalized on a number of federal funding programs, including the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program and New Freedom mobility grants from the Federal Transit Administration.



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### Tips from Will Stoner:



#### Don't forget to include community partners, like AARP

- The goal of the AARP is to work to ensure that people of all ages and abilities can lead their best life in the home and community of their choice, Stoner said, and, a critical part of meeting that vision revolves around mobility. "So we've been doing a deep dive into complete streets and walkability," he said.
- On a statewide level, AARP worked with a number of stakeholders, including TA and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, to get a complete streets bill passed by the legislature and signed by the governor.
- Like TA's local campaign, AARP helped to push the state DOT to implement street improvements for seniors by making the case with hard data. "Tri-State was releasing reports annually, showing the high rates of pedestrian fatalities," Stoner said. "Two of the worst intersections in the Tri-State area were on Long Island, and due to the report, Governor Patterson and the state DOT responded to this in a quicker way than they would have if we'd asked nicely. When we released the report, we were also able to say, 'New York City has great Safe Routes for Seniors program; New York state needs to think about doing something similar.'"

#### Don't let community input get trumped by agency recommendations

- After the release of the Tri-State report, AARP worked with community leaders to assess the two dangerous locations — in Smithtown and Hempstead — using its walkability tool. "We walked the streets and looked at the intersections where people were getting killed and it's glaringly obvious that very simple changes could make a world of difference," Stoner said.
- At Hempstead, the DOT quickly and effectively took action to make the intersection safer, including curb cuts, ADA buttons and count-down pedestrian signals.
- Smithtown was a different story. "Unfortunately, their response was not quick enough and people are continuing to get killed," Stoner said. "The state DOT presented two different proposals but the community doesn't like either one of them and they've put together their own plan. With competing plans, the AARP is bringing [walkability expert] Dan Burden in to help us push back on the DOT and say we want a plan that will really have an impact on fatalities. We don't just want a response; we want a good response."

#### Additional resources on Safe Routes for Seniors in Alliance Resource Library:

<http://www.peoplepoweredmovement.org/site/index.php/members/members4/C585>