



BE ACTIVE TOGETHER NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE 2013 PROGRESS REPORT

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PURPOSE AND APPROACH. Be Active Together (BAT) is a project to improve the health of the residents of the High Point and Greenbridge public housing communities through the development of community leadership and expanded opportunities for physical activity. BAT takes aim at the staggering health disparities that afflict communities where incomes are low and residents face language, cultural and educational barriers to health. The BAT project was established by Neighborhood House and its partners through a grant funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) (2008-2013). The High Point and Greenbridge communities are excellent proving

grounds for strategies to address cultural and linguistic challenges because they are alive with diversity. Twenty languages are spoken at High Point and thirteen are spoken at Greenbridge.

BAT Partners

- Neighborhood House (lead agency)
- Residents of High Point and Greenbridge
- Public Health – Seattle & King County
- Seattle Children’s Research Institute
- King County Housing Authority
- Seattle Housing Authority
- NeighborCare Health – High Point Clinic

Funded by a five-year grant from the National Institutes of Health

The members of each ethnic and language group have strong social connections within their own community, but weaker ties across groups. Differences in cultural norms, traditions and belief systems pose challenges in building a sense of community. BAT bridged these differences by bringing residents together around a common goal: improving the health of all residents.

To achieve that goal, BAT increased opportunities for culturally appropriate physical activity, social connection and leadership development. Increased physical activity directly contributes to better health by preventing health problems such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Strengthening social connections helps to promote physical activity and has been shown to improve health as well.

Although BAT activities welcomed all members of the community, BAT focused most of its effort on the three largest language groups in the communities: those who speak English, Somali and Vietnamese.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT. From the beginning BAT involved community members in shaping, carrying out, and evaluating the project. Residents worked side by side with leaders of community-based organizations and researchers on the Steering Committee that directed the project’s work. Community Action Teams (CAT) of ten residents at each site had an important role in shaping every aspect of the project and encouraging other residents to participate. Community members also were part of the Research Committee, which developed the project’s evaluation.

“Getting involved in community life changed my life. It is even more important and difficult for people who are not born here to make connections. Being asked to be part of CAT was great!”

– A Community Action Team member

THE STEERING COMMITTEE’S VISION STATEMENT.

High Point and Greenbridge communities are places where we embrace diversity while building relationships through community activities on a foundation of safety and trust. We see our communities as places that support people to be healthy, where it is easy and affordable to be physically active and eat healthy foods.



BARRIERS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY. With that vision in mind, the BAT staff and Steering Committee held individual conversations with residents and ten focus groups to determine what kept them from being more active. The conversations and focus groups were conducted in English, Vietnamese, Khmer, and Somali languages. The barriers they identified are listed below, along with the actions they proposed to overcome them:

BARRIERS	BAT’S ACTIONS
Our community has no say in what is offered	Promote community leadership to advocate for services and address needs
Cost of recreation programs is too high	Offer free or low-cost physical activities
Recreation centers are too far away	Create physical activity opportunities on-site Facilitate access to off-site fitness programs
Need for child care	Offer child care when possible
Don’t know what services are available or need information in own language	Provide information about physical activity opportunities Provide bilingual outreach
Programs do not fit cultural norms and practices	Offer culturally appropriate options

BAT then set in motion an action plan to overcome those barriers. Here are five examples.

1 DEVELOPED COMMUNITY LEADERS TO ORGANIZE FOR ACTION

During the focus groups, many community members stated that they did not feel comfortable speaking up for their needs or know who to ask for help in solving problems. To overcome this problem, BAT developed the leadership skills of the Community Action Teams (CAT) and other residents at High Point and Greenbridge through training in research methods, public speaking and community organizing. The CAT members were soon able to assist with BAT’s community outreach. They also helped residents become engaged in the community council or neighborhood association at High Point and Greenbridge, and led forums in their communities with a theme of “Community Active Together.” At CAT members’ suggestion, the BAT team worked to develop better connections between residents and management of the Seattle and King County Housing Authorities.

“I noticed at community meetings (Greenbridge Community Council) that some residents started to voice their concerns and opinions and ask questions, which is a good sign that the work Jen and Tracie are doing is showing results: people are becoming vocal, meaning they are comfortable speaking in public and advocating for what they want or need.”

– A community partner

As a result of these actions:

- ❖ Thirty residents participated in Community Action Teams (CAT) over five years. Health and community building efforts will continue through the Greenbridge CAT and a new formed group, Women in Action.
- ❖ More than 200 residents participated in the 2010, 2011 and 2012 Immigrant and Refugee Legislative Days in Olympia, Washington.
- ❖ CAT and community members met with officials from the Seattle Mayor’s office, Seattle City Council, and the Departments of Parks and Recreation and Transportation to press for changes in City policy.

“Together we can make decisions about what needs to be done in the community.”

– A Community Action Team member

2 CREATED OPPORTUNITIES FOR A HEALTHIER COMMUNITY



When BAT started, High Point and Greenbridge residents had few options to exercise or enjoy physical activities—no affordable exercise classes or access to fitness equipment. Activities at other locations were hard to reach, costly and/or not culturally appropriate. BAT began to address these challenges by offering free, accessible and culturally appropriate exercise classes on-site at both housing communities. Women-only exercise classes were soon added to address the cultural norms of the many residents who are Muslim. Opportunities were

limited for children, as well. BAT organized community forums to provide residents with a chance to put forward their ideas about how to solve these problems. At a High Point community forum, a six-year-old boy stood up and said, “I want swings. We need a swing set here.” His idea was added to the list of priorities when

the community created the Bataan Playground with 200 volunteers and later installed an Outdoor Fitness Zone with eight pieces of exercise equipment.

As a result of these actions:

- ❖ Bataan Park now includes a playground for children and exercise equipment for teens and adults.
- ❖ High Point Neighborhood House Family Center created an exercise corner with two cardio exercise machines.
- ❖ High Point Community Center started offering a weekly, low-cost, women-only exercise class with child care provided.

The success of these projects points out the value of providing facilities for physical activity as neighborhoods are designed or improved.

“It is free, in neighborhood; I can bring my 2-year-old son and let him play in back while I exercise; I really wanted to exercise and having the classes here (Wiley Center) made it happen.”

– An exercise class participant

3 DEVELOPED PARTNERSHIPS TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY NEEDS

During the past five years, BAT and its community partners have organized a wide range of activities to bring people together across the boundaries of income, language and culture. They held community cooking classes and potlucks, and helped provide access to affordable, fresh produce in High Point. Field trips, such as to Woodland Park Zoo, Camp Long, and the Skagit Valley Tulip Festival, promoted community building and increased awareness of the opportunities for physical activity outside their neighborhoods.

“I’d like more opportunities like the field trip to Seward Park. I really liked that, having the bus available, providing a healthy lunch. I met a few new people from the community who aren’t at the exercise class. I like the community thing.”

– A social events participant

As a result of these actions:

- ❖ Over 100 community gatherings field trips and health education programs were held involving thousands of residents.
- ❖ Annual health fairs and field trips will be continued by partner organizations.
- ❖ The West Seattle YMCA offered up to 40 scholarships to BAT participants who wanted to continue with fitness activities.

4 OFFERED RECREATION PROGRAMS TO EVERYONE: WOMEN ONLY SWIM

As part of its strategy to encourage physical activity, BAT organized a Somali Women’s Group to focus on the unique barriers to exercise that they confront as women immigrants who share Muslim beliefs. The Group identified the need for exercise and swim programs that are for women only, to meet the cultural norms within their community. In 2011, BAT teamed up with community members and partners and rented time at the Southwest Community Pool to offer a women-only swim program.

At first, the pilot swim program focused solely on creating a culturally appropriate opportunity to swim. Only female staff was present, and the windows of the pool were covered for privacy. When BAT staff learned that many of the women did not know how to swim, they changed the program to provide a series of swimming lessons, at a cost most participants could afford. Participants paid \$20 each for a series of 10 swimming lessons, and \$2 per hour of open swim time. The rest of the program cost was split between the Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation and Be Active Together.

As interest grew, BAT created partnerships with the private, nonprofit Evergreen Pool in White Center and the West Seattle YMCA to offer low-cost, women-only swim programs. More than 400 women ages 12 to 70 participated in the programs.



"It's the first opportunity to swim in my whole life. For my culture and my religion, I can't go with men and boys, only with women."

"I never did it because I'm shy. I've never been in the water before."

– Participants in women-only swim

As a result of these actions:

- ❖ BAT and swimmers ultimately succeeded in changing City of Seattle policy. In 2013, the Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation adopted the women-only swim model as a part of its regular programming at four public pools. Evergreen Pool and the West Seattle YMCA have also incorporated the women-only model as part of their regular programming.
- ❖ BAT received the 2013 Tom Warren Award for Innovation from the Washington Drowning Prevention Network.
- ❖ The BAT women-only swim model has been featured in local and national media as an innovation in recreation programming.

5 IMPROVED PEDESTRIAN SAFETY IN BOTH NEIGHBORHOODS

In focus groups, many community members expressed concern about the danger of crossing busy streets to reach the community center, schools and other destinations. These issues came into sharp focus after two pedestrian fatalities and multiple accidents on 35th Ave. Southwest near High Point. CAT members and residents held three traffic safety rallies and conducted tours for local officials of the problem areas. They conducted walking audits, traffic surveys, and speed monitoring, and pushed for changes in school bus routes from



Denny Middle School to High Point. The residents' advocacy brought safety improvements that benefit all pedestrians at High Point and Greenbridge.

As a result of these actions:

- ❖ A full traffic light and speed radar monitor have been installed at Raymond & 35th Ave. Southwest.
- ❖ A crosswalk is in place at Morgan & 34th Ave. Southwest.
- ❖ Crossing flags are now in use near White Center Heights elementary school at Greenbridge.

OUR RESEARCH AND WHAT WE LEARNED

With help from our research partners at Seattle Children's and Public Health – Seattle & King County, BAT conducted a process evaluation mid-way through the project. The evaluation found that BAT had succeeded in four key areas:

- ❖ Engaging the community in a respectful way.
- ❖ Increasing leadership skills among residents.
- ❖ Organizing events to meet community needs.
- ❖ Opening a dialogue between residents and management of the Housing Authorities.

“BAT is trying to get people in the community more active – more often, more time – because there are so many basic needs people need to address every day, something they lose track of how important being active is for their health. It is particularly important to facilitate being active for people living with low incomes because they have less resources and choices to be active.”

– A Steering Committee member

Seattle Children's Research Center, with help from community residents, also conducted an evaluation of the overall impact on physical activity in the two housing communities. Trained interviewers surveyed a sample of 136 residents in their primary language (English, Somali or Vietnamese) early in BAT's work and again at the end. The results showed:

- ❖ A significant increase in physical activity reported by residents who participated in BAT activities.
- ❖ A significant increase in residents' perceptions of their neighborhood as a lively and interesting place to live.
- ❖ Improvements in social connectedness among neighbors.
- ❖ Increases in the availability of information about physical activity resources and opportunities.

A LASTING LEGACY

BAT has created models for physical activity programs that will continue beyond the NIH grant:

- ❖ Six pools are offering women-only swims, thanks to the City of Seattle, Evergreen Pool, and the West Seattle YMCA.
- ❖ The women-only exercise classes are continuing at Greenbridge, thanks to King County Housing Authority.
- ❖ Community Action Team members are advocating for exercise equipment for residents at NIA Senior Housing at Greenbridge.
- ❖ The High Point exercise corner is continuing, thanks to Neighborhood House.

- ❖ Pedestrians will be safer at intersections near High Point and Greenbridge, thanks to the cooperation of the City of Seattle and the Seattle and King County Departments of Transportation.
- ❖ A group of women started Women in Action to promote leadership on advisory committees to continue advocacy for women-only swim and affordable fitness opportunities at Parks and Recreation Centers.

IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

BAT's work offers a valuable model to encourage physical activity and social connection among low-income, ethnic and immigrant communities. Key lessons are:

- ❖ Reach out to community members to engage them in physical activity programs.
- ❖ Ask residents what they need to increase their level of physical activity.
- ❖ Provide leadership training for interested residents of public housing and other low-income neighborhoods.
- ❖ Empower community members to advise policy makers about differences in cultural norms, and how to adapt policies and practices (such as women-only programming).
- ❖ Bring opportunities for physical activity closer to where people live by installing outdoor fitness equipment in local parks and building room for physical activity in affordable housing projects.
- ❖ Make exercise affordable, with free or low-cost options.



“BAT’s ability to bring together diverse groups and make sure they disseminate information in multiple ways to community providers is very important. They are mentioned as the ‘poster child’ of getting the community voice heard.”

– A community partner

The challenge now is to translate these lessons into public policies and practices that will have a broader impact, not only upon members of low-income refugee and immigrant populations, but among the broader population in low-income neighborhoods, where the impact of health disparities is felt most seriously. To that end, Neighborhood House is proposing a partnership with the Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation to engage diverse cultures in active living and build healthier communities through the improvements at public recreation centers and swimming pools. The proposed partnership would create pilot projects at High Point and Yesler Terrace Community Centers designed to more fully engage low-income, immigrant refugees in all aspects of the centers’ operations. The lessons learned through BAT and the pilot projects would then be applied throughout Seattle’s community recreation system, with the goal of making Seattle a national model.

Thank You to Our Partners

• Residents of High Point and Greenbridge • Neighborhood House • Seattle Housing Authority • King County Housing Authority • Public Health – Seattle & King County • Seattle Children’s Research Institute • NeighborCare Health – High Point Clinic • Seattle Parks and Recreation • Austin Foundation • High Point Neighborhood and Open Space Associations • Evergreen Community Aquatic Center • West Seattle YMCA • Seattle Children’s Hospital • White Center CDA

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