

# active living

IN THE WASHINGTON D.C. METROPOLITAN AREA



Pan American  
Health  
Organization



World Health  
Organization

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE  
Americas



# *active living*

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Active Living in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area  
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Promote and achieve  
a greater level of

**active living**  
among the resident population

# 1. Introduction

This document summarizes various actions, experiences, and policies that are taking place at the local level within the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area (WMA) to promote and achieve a greater level of active living among the resident population. The report is meant to showcase these actions and experiences in order to promote awareness of current efforts, as well as highlight opportunities that may help to reduce the gaps that create disparities within certain subsets of the population. It is intended to help guide and inform relevant actors of opportunities for improved collaboration and other potential strategies to further promote physical activity and address common barriers to that.

A primary audience for the document is key actors involved in promoting physical activity, including within the WMA. These actors include, but are not limited to: the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), the United States Department of Health and Human Services (U.S. HHS), local government agencies, nongovernmental organizations and other researchers and educators involved in or related to this field of work. A secondary audience includes policymakers and members of civil society outside of the WMA, who may find the document insightful as they promote similar efforts in other cities or metropolitan areas.

The leading causes of death and disability worldwide are noncommunicable diseases, which contribute to about

**40 million deaths per year.**





## 2. Background

The leading causes of death and disability worldwide are noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), which contribute to about 40 million deaths per year.<sup>1</sup> Regarding premature mortality (among individuals aged 30-70), it is estimated that 15 million of these deaths are attributable to preventable NCD risk factors, one of which is physical inactivity.<sup>1</sup> The benefits of physical activity, however, are well documented, and include strengthening bones and muscles, helping with weight control, and improving mental health. These outcomes help people to live longer and reduce their risks for many diseases.<sup>2</sup> Additional values and benefits include economic benefits as a result of increased productivity and performance, and protection against the high costs of treatment and management of NCDs.<sup>3</sup>

Within the United States of America, nearly 80% of the adult population does not meet the recommended guidelines for physical activity.<sup>4</sup> Although individual behaviors and choices affect and often limit physical activity levels, it is widely recognized that physical activity is largely determined by socioeconomic, structural, and environmental determinants.<sup>5,6,7</sup> Due to the divisions of power among federal, state, and local governments, many of the national-level programs and policies of the United States that promote physical activity are not able to influence activities that address structural or environmental determinants at the local level, such as the urban design of cities. Rather, national initiatives primarily focus on individual behaviors that limit participation in physical activity.

In contrast, local governments often have greater opportunities and capacities to address the structural, environmental, and socioeconomic determinants within their respective jurisdictions. Local governmental agencies have the ability to develop, adopt, and implement policies and initiatives that may help enable individuals to easily and safely engage in physical activity. Together with other organizations, advocacy groups, researchers, etc., local-level actors can and must be the driving force for implementing policies and actions that promote active living within their respective communities.

Many local actors within the WMA have made significant and notable progress in addressing structural, environmental, and socioeconomic barriers to physical activity. Actions include the implementation of urban and road design policies, the development and maintenance of pedestrian and bicycle networks, addressing both actual and perceived safety issues, providing education, and increasing spatial and financial accessibility for residents to all of the above. Despite significant achievements and progress, there still seem to be gaps in engendering more active living and reducing disparities within certain subsets of the population, such as the Hispanic population of the region.<sup>8</sup> As local actors become more aware of their successful actions and available resources, however, opportunities for greater collaboration may arise to close these gaps and ensure equity in these efforts.



The WMA's local bikeshare system,

# Capital Bikeshare,

was first implemented within  
the District of Columbia in 2010

## 3. Current Actions in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area

Local actors in the WMA have been promoting more active living among the population in many different ways. The following section summarizes some of the noteworthy experiences that encourage and enable an active way of life, though it is not a comprehensive review of all activities nor all organizations involved in these efforts. The approaches listed below are some of the primary strategies by which many actors are promoting active living and overcoming common barriers to physical activity:

- policy frameworks
- supportive infrastructure
- access to resources
- education and awareness

While different experiences are described within the context of one particular approach, many actions have components that intersect and cross over between multiple approaches.

### 3.1 Policy Frameworks

Within the past two decades, each of the cities and counties of the WMA—Washington, D.C.; Arlington County, Virginia; the city of Alexandria, Virginia; Fairfax County, Virginia; Montgomery County, Maryland; and Prince George’s County, Maryland—have developed and adopted policy frameworks that help to guide many of the other actions and initiatives that promote physical activity, especially in creating safe environments for pedestrian and bicycling activities. Spearheaded by each jurisdiction’s department of transportation or its equivalent agency, these frameworks have been developed as “pedestrian master plans,” “bicycle master plans,” or “master transportation plans.”

Each master plan that has been adopted sets forth overarching goals to improve conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists.



Examples of these goals, from the District of Columbia's Pedestrian Master Plan, are "to reduce the number of pedestrians killed and injured in crashes with motor vehicles," and "to increase pedestrian activity by making walking a comfortable and accessible mode of travel throughout all parts of the District."<sup>9</sup> In addition to setting goals, the plans also detail specific objectives and recommendations that help to guide the institution of policies to govern such actions as street designs that include accommodations for separate bicycle lanes or pedestrian crossings and stronger enforcement of traffic laws that protect vulnerable users (especially pedestrians and bicyclists). The master plans of each city or county also generally include timelines and progress indicators for the proposed objectives.

The development and adoption of master plans specific to bicycling, walking, and other transportation activities provide each jurisdiction with the opportunity to address challenges, barriers, and other safety issues for pedestrians, bicyclists, and persons with disabilities. These documents create a foundation of political will and commitment upon which other programs and initiatives can be more easily built. They provide the groundwork for the implementation of other local-level activities and initiatives that promote active living, especially in terms of developing supportive infrastructure, minimizing issues of accessibility, and promoting relevant education and awareness activities.

## 3.2 Supportive Infrastructure

With goals and policies in place, WMA cities and counties have continued to support active living and active transportation by guiding the design, development, redevelopment, and maintenance of supportive infrastructure, particularly roads, pedestrian networks, and bicycle networks. Bike lanes, sidewalks, and trails are frequently integrated with already-existing streets prioritized for vehicular traffic. If local communities wish to promote a walking or biking culture, for either transportation or recreation, this creates a particular need to ensure that new streets and already-existing streets are designed or redesigned in ways to serve all users efficiently, while also ensuring protection for vulnerable users, e.g., pedestrians, bicyclists, and persons with disabilities. If roads and transportation are unsafe—or are perceived to be unsafe—for pedestrians and bicyclists, it can be very difficult to have active people and communities.

One particular experience that local governments of the WMA have begun to integrate into their jurisdictions is the Vision Zero initiative. This initiative is designed specifically to address issues of safety and security in transportation for all users, including motorists, bicyclists, pedestrians, and persons with disabilities. The primary objective of Vision Zero is to reach zero annual fatalities and serious injuries among travelers using local transportation systems by a specific target date. The District of Columbia, for example, has committed to reduce the number of transportation-related fatalities and serious injuries within the city to zero by the year 2024.<sup>10</sup>





A guiding philosophy of the Vision Zero initiative is that while humans are imperfect and crashes do happen, the transportation system can and should be designed in such a way that it can be forgiving of human error and still protect all users. One of the ways this is accomplished is by altering the engineering, design, and maintenance of streets and intersections in ways that not only protect motorists, but also create safe, protected lanes and spaces for pedestrians and bicyclists and other vulnerable users.

Since adoption of the program by some local governments of the WMA beginning in 2016, several measures are already being implemented to improve the road infrastructure and active transportation networks within their respective jurisdictions. The District of

Columbia reports that since 2016, engineering accomplishments have included installation of curb ramps, sidewalks, bus stops, and traffic signals to accommodate accessibility, especially for disabled persons. Additionally, several new miles of bike lanes have been put in place, including protected bike lanes on major streets, which provide buffers and sometimes physical barriers between vehicles and bicyclists.<sup>10</sup>

Other examples of ongoing improvements include streets designed with cycle tracks (separated bike lanes) and painted bike lanes, as well as the placement of High intensity Activated crossWalk (HAWK) signals and other enhancements in locations that make it safer and more convenient for pedestrians to cross streets.



### 3.3 Access to Resources

In addition to developing infrastructure to better accommodate active transportation options for residents and visitors to the region, WMA actors are actively working to increase availability of and access to resources that help to enable those options. One of the most noteworthy experiences in this regard has been the implementation of bikesharing systems, which provide individuals with the opportunity to use shared bikes as a means of quick, easy, affordable transportation throughout many parts of the WMA.

The WMA's most prominent bikesharing system, Capital Bikeshare, was first implemented in the District of Columbia in 2010. The system was established as an alternative public transit system, providing users with access to short-term bicycle rentals

as a more convenient and active mode of transportation, either during commutes or as a leisure-time activity. Bikes are kept locked at docking stations, which are strategically located throughout participating jurisdictions. After users enter their method of payment or swipe a pre-purchased membership key at any station of their choice, they can unlock a bike and then later return it to any other station across the system. Furthermore, service is available 24 hours a day, every day of the year.<sup>11</sup>

Since the Capital Bikeshare system was first launched, multiple cities and counties surrounding the District have teamed up with the program to expand the system throughout their own jurisdictions as well.<sup>11</sup> Because the various participating cities and counties have opted into using the same bikesharing system, users are able to drop off bikes at any station, even if the user has crossed into a city or county other than where the bike was initially picked up.

In the nearly 10 years since it was introduced into the region, the Capital Bikeshare system has expanded significantly, thanks to increasing usage and popularity. Beginning with 10 stations and 120 bikes only available in the District of Columbia, as of August 2017, the system has now expanded to 460 stations with over 4000 bikes, serving an additional four surrounding jurisdictions.<sup>11</sup> The total number of registered members has also grown by 2,000%, from 1,600 members in 2010 to nearly 32,000 by the end of 2016.<sup>12</sup>

While bikesharing systems provide access to bicycles as a potential mode of active transportation, it is recognized that the fees to use the system often create issues of financial inaccessibility. In order to combat

this barrier, the Capital Bikeshare system is working with other local actors to provide highly discounted—and sometimes free—membership options. These options help to remove cost barriers and further promote usage of the bikeshare system, even by members of the community who may not be able to afford the fees otherwise.

By providing bicycles as a convenient and accessible resource to members of the community, WMA stakeholders are able to promote bicycling as a viable and appealing option for transportation and recreation. In this way, bikesharing is a major component of the strategies and experiences in the region that help to promote more active living within the community.





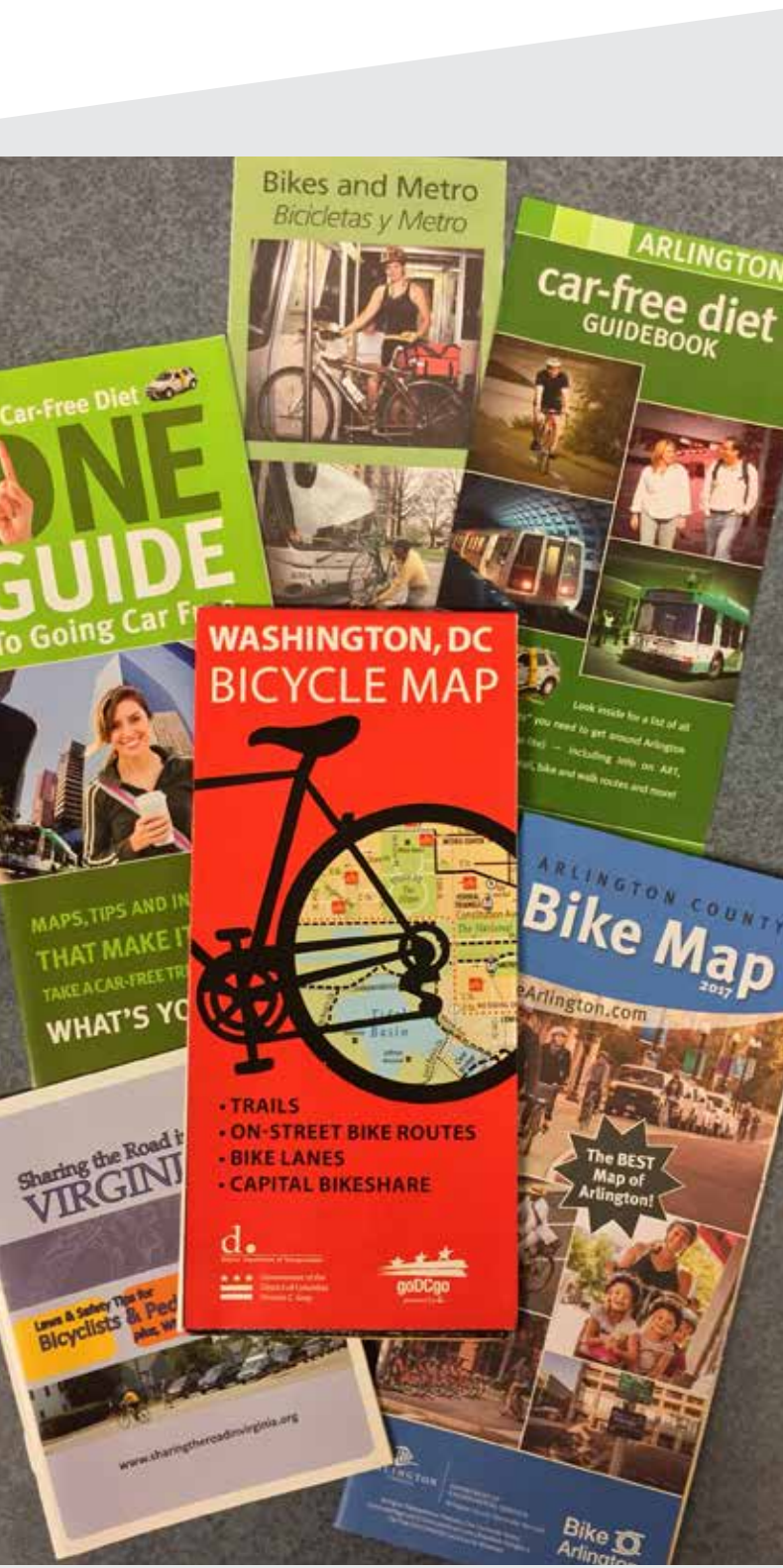
## 3.4 Education and Awareness

A fourth approach by WMA stakeholders to promote physical activity in the community utilizes education programs and awareness campaigns to promote opportunities to engage in regular physical activity and inform community members of its associated benefits. Multiple actors in the region, including government agencies and nonprofit organizations, work through this approach—often in collaboration with each other.

Noteworthy experiences include the active transportation programs implemented in Arlington County, Virginia. Two of these, the WalkArlington program and the BikeArlington program, specifically aim to promote a walking and biking culture and provide the resources to educate and provide information about the programs, in order to encourage the use of these forms of active transportation. These programs aim to make it easy, safe, and comfortable for residents and visitors to travel around the county by either walking or biking.

Each program has its own dedicated website that helps to provide easily accessible information and resources. WalkArlington's website provides information about the benefits of walking as an alternative mode of transportation. It also includes a series of maps with self-guided walking tours for people to explore different areas and neighborhoods through Arlington County.<sup>13</sup>





Similarly, the BikeArlington program offers an informational website with tips, advice on safety and bicycle commuting, information on bicycling facilities around Arlington, and maps with suggested rides around the county.<sup>14</sup> Done in collaboration with other WMA stakeholders, biking classes are also available for adults and can accommodate riders of any skill level, including those who have not yet learned to ride.<sup>15</sup>

Other actors in the WMA also help to promote physical activity through a variety of programs that target particular needs of different age groups and demographics. One of them, the Washington Area Bicyclist Association (WABA), has a strong focus on bicycling education and advocacy efforts.

The education efforts by WABA include classes to teach skills to bicycle riders of all levels. Sessions for adults instruct participants on how to ride a bike for the first time, or teach more advanced skills for greater confidence to ride in different road, bike lane, or trail situations around the region. Classes for children are offered at public schools in the District of Columbia to teach bike safety and basic riding skills. Other classes adopt a “train-the-trainer” model, instructing local physical education teachers on strategies for educating grade-school children on bike-riding. WABA also organizes community rides and offers bicycling seminars for workplaces.<sup>16</sup>



Advocacy efforts by WABA target specific goals and issues, such as ensuring that local jurisdictions have adequate policies on bicycle parking and commuter amenities for employees (such as showers and changing stations), improvements to neglected portions of popular trails through the regional bicycle network, and encouragement for police forces to better understand and enforce laws that affect the safety of bicyclists.<sup>17</sup>

Other efforts include outreach programs, such as to help marginalized and underserved populations ride bikes more often for both transportation and fitness. Outreach efforts are often performed in lower-income neighborhoods and workplaces in order to provide community members with materials such as educational literature or even bicycle lights.<sup>18</sup>



Increase collaboration  
to maximize current efforts to promote

# physical activity

## 4. Road Map of Future Directions

Although significant achievements have been made to promote physical activity and active living within the Washington Metropolitan Area, there is still progress to be made, especially in reducing disparities among subsets of the population. The recommendations included in this section identify certain opportunities for local actors to implement additional activities and efforts in the future. The recommendations may serve as a guide for local actors in the WMA, as well as corresponding actors in other cities and metropolitan areas, to help address remaining gaps and barriers to physical activity.

The road map and recommendations presented are based on the suggestions and discussions that transpired during the Promotion of Physical Activity among Hispanic Populations Living in the Washington Metropolitan Area Strategic Planning Workshop, which took place on 8-9 August 2017 at the Pan American Health Organization Headquarters in Washington, D.C. The event brought together representatives from multiple WMA organizations and local governmental agencies. Key workshop objectives included identifying gaps and barriers that may be limiting physical activity, and discussing potential strategies and

opportunities for increased collaboration to maximize current efforts to promote physical activity and to implement new activities.

Stemming from the discussions that took place during the workshop, the road map has four main directions:

1. Improve multisectoral collaboration by developing and improving relationships among relevant actors engaged in activities that address barriers to physical activity, through, e.g., health promotion, road safety, urban design, bicycle education and advocacy, and active transportation.
2. Support data collection activities and/or analyses on risks, utilization, access, perceptions of the community, and impact, by coordinating capacities and resources among organizations.
3. Utilize global and regional action plans and models to help inform and guide local goal-setting, policy, and development actions.
4. Support interagency implementation of activities and programs that minimize common barriers to physical activity (e.g., in terms of access, culture, and safety/perceptions of safety), especially for underserved populations.

## 4.1 Directions for Future Work

**Direction:** Improve multisectoral collaboration by developing and improving relationships among relevant actors engaged in activities that address barriers to physical activity, through, e.g., health promotion, road safety, urban design, bicycle education and advocacy, and active transportation.

Actions	Expected Results	Actors
<p>Develop informal and/or formal modalities of cooperation between Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) and local organizations, such as through communities of practice and/or memorandums of understanding.</p>	<p>Improved communication among organizations about activities, events, and programs related to physical activity promotion/reduction of barriers.</p> <p>Improved access to and efficiency of resources and information across organizations.</p> <p>Sustainable development of activities.</p> <p>Interagency accountability to commitments and indicators.</p>	<p>International organizations (e.g., PAHO/WHO)</p> <p>Federal government bodies (e.g., U.S. Department of Health &amp; Human Services (U.S. HHS), U.S. National Park Service (U.S. NPS))</p> <p>Local government bodies and transportation departments (e.g., District Department of Transportation (DDOT), Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT), Arlington County Commuter Services (ACCS))</p> <p>Local and international nongovernmental organizations (e.g., Washington Area Bicyclist Association (WABA), World Resources Institute (WRI))</p>

**Direction:** Support data collection activities and/or analyses on risks, utilization, access, perceptions of the community, and impact, by coordinating capacities and resources among organizations.

Actions	Expected Results	Actors
<p>Conduct impact evaluations in neighborhoods/ communities surrounding Capital Bikeshare stations, including assessments pre- and post-installation.</p>	<p>Improved understanding of bikeshare user data, including motivations, demographics, and perceptions.</p> <p>Stronger evidence base of multifaceted benefits of bicycling and bikesharing for users and surrounding communities (health, financial, safety, environmental), to influence future policy decisions.</p> <p>Strong case study of WMA region for PAHO to advise and promote similar efforts in other cities.</p>	<p>International organizations (e.g., PAHO/WHO)</p> <p>Capital Bikeshare</p> <p>Local government transportation departments (e.g., DDOT, MCDOT, ACCS)</p> <p>Research and academic institutions (e.g., local universities, WRI, National Institutes of Health (NIH), Centers for Disease Control (CDC))</p>
<p>Assist with collection, analysis, and presentation of evidence and data to assist with Vision Zero priorities.</p>	<p>Stronger evidence for Vision Zero program managers to advocate for priority issues.</p> <p>Increased ability for lawmakers to justify the implementation of policies and actions that maximize the safety of the community, especially if not in line with citizen complaints.</p>	<p>International organizations (e.g., PAHO)</p> <p>Local government transportation departments (e.g., DDOT, MCDOT, ACCS)</p> <p>Research and academic institutions (e.g., Universities, WRI, NIH, CDC)</p>

**Direction:** Utilize global and regional action plans and models to help inform and guide local goal-setting, policy, and development actions.

Actions	Expected Results	Actors
<p>Apply guiding principles set forth in the Global Action Plan on Physical Activity and its accompanying toolkit.</p>	<p>Additional guidance and toolkits will enhance local-level actions.</p> <p>Strong evidence base and credibility will influence local policies and priorities.</p> <p>Progress made towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relating to reducing NCDs.</p>	<p>International organizations (e.g., WHO, PAHO)</p> <p>All local actors</p>
<p>Apply strategies and recommendations set forth in the World Health Organization’s Save LIVES technical package for road safety.</p>	<p>Evidence and strategies from the package will support and influence development of policies governing road design and infrastructure.</p> <p>Policies and measures—once in place— will ensure greater protection and safety of vulnerable road users, e.g., pedestrians and bicyclists.</p> <p>Improved perceptions of safety and security by users of roads, sidewalks, bike lanes, public transit, etc.</p> <p>Progress made towards achieving global goals (SDG 3.6) and local goals (Vision Zero) to reduce road traffic deaths and injuries.</p>	<p>International organizations (e.g., PAHO)</p> <p>Local government transportation departments (e.g., DDOT, MCDOT, ACCS)</p>
<p>Integrate principles and strategies for sustainable cities into local policies and urban design plans.</p>	<p>Following future urban and road development, increased access and safety for users of all transportation modes.</p>	<p>Local government agencies (e.g., departments of transportation, housing and urban development)</p> <p>Local and international nongovernmental organizations (e.g., WABA, WRI)</p>



**Direction:** Support interagency implementation of activities and programs that minimize common barriers to physical activity (e.g., in terms of access, culture, and safety/perceptions of safety), especially for underserved populations.

Actions	Expected Results	Actors
<p>Implement programs that regularly open major city streets to nonmotorists, such as the Open Streets or Ciclovías Recreativas programs.</p>	<p>Increased opportunities for the population to engage in physical activity.</p> <p>Increased levels of physical activity (amount of time engaged in physical activity) within the population.</p> <p>Changed perceptions among population of biking and walking culture; reduced perceptions of socioeconomic status associated with motorists versus non-motorists, i.e. the perception that having and using a vehicle is a symbol of affluence and more desirable than being a pedestrian or bicyclist.</p>	<p>Local government agencies (e.g., DDOT, ACCS.)</p>
<p>Continue to provide support to meet the goals of Vision Zero in the District of Columbia, Montgomery County, and the city of Alexandria.</p> <p>Encourage adoption of Vision Zero initiative by other WMA jurisdictions.</p>	<p>Increased number of roads with sidewalks, safe pedestrian crossings, bike lanes, protected cycle tracks, etc.</p> <p>Decreased incidence of traffic injuries and fatalities, especially among motorcyclists, bicyclists, and pedestrians.</p> <p>Greater awareness of, compliance with, and enforcement of traffic laws that protect residents.</p> <p>Increased safety (and perception of safety) for all types of road users.</p>	<p>Local government agencies (e.g., mayors' offices, DDOT, ACCS, law enforcement)</p>
<p>Support continuing collaboration in community outreach efforts to promote awareness of, education on, and access to active transportation options.</p>	<p>Increased population awareness of available resources.</p> <p>Increased dissemination of information for potential active transportation users.</p>	<p>Capital Bikeshare</p> <p>WABA</p> <p>Local government transportation departments (e.g., DDOT, MCDOT, ACCS)</p>

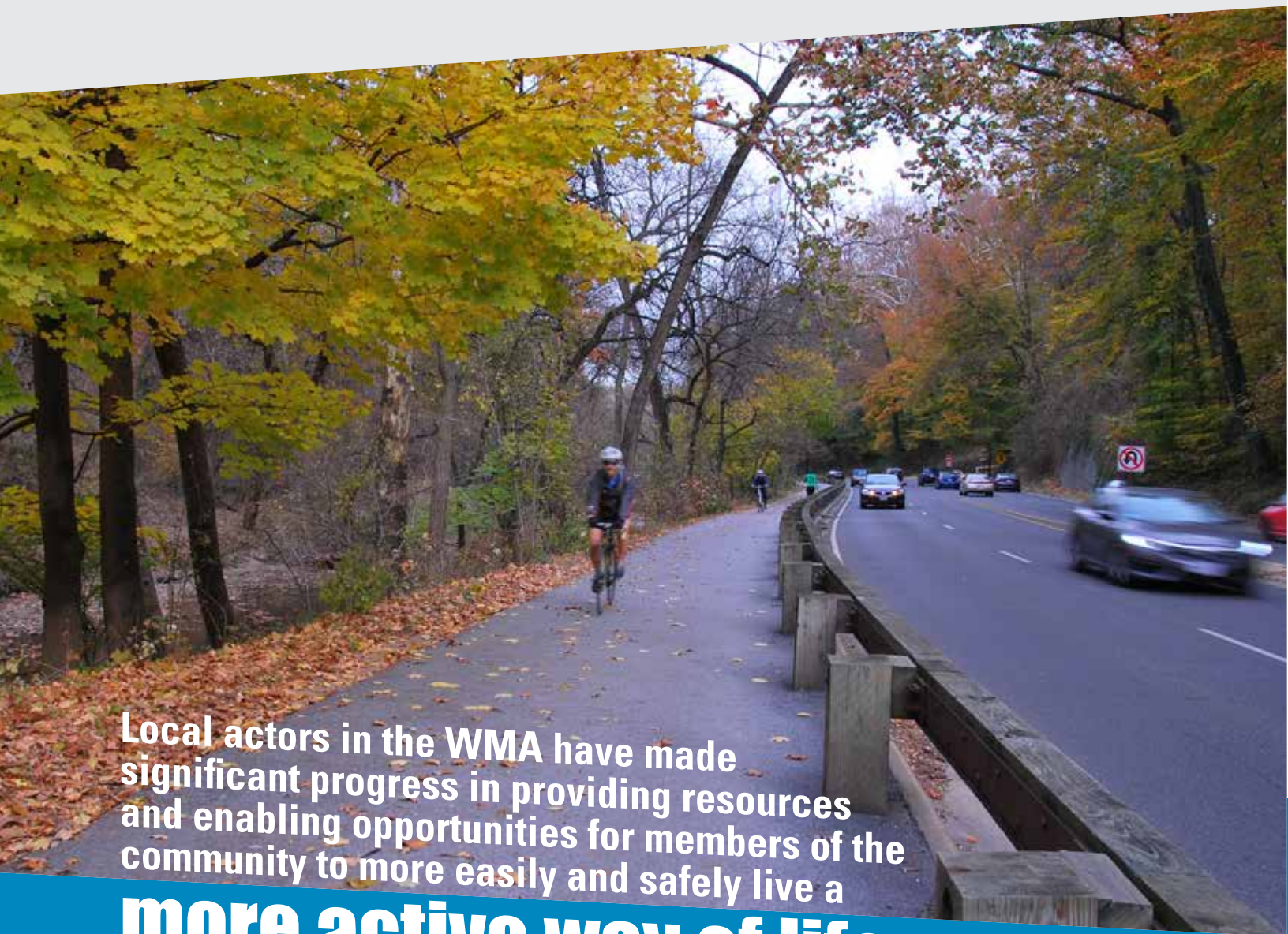


These recommendations and directions are framed to guide future work in the WMA and to encourage increased collaboration among actors to continue progress on more active living in the community. While these directions were proposed and tailored to actors and circumstances specific to the WMA, they may be useful strategies for other cities seeking progress in their own efforts.

For the cities and regions outside the WMA that are working to identify opportunities to further promote active living in their

jurisdictions, it will be important to begin by mapping the existing assets and actors within the community. The road map provided above may also be a useful guide to identify corresponding or equivalent agencies, organizations, and resources. The relevant actors should begin to discuss each one's respective missions, assets, etc. in order to find common ground and converging agendas. Doing so will enable actors to collaborate across multiple sectors and more effectively address the many barriers that may limit physical activity within their communities.





Local actors in the WMA have made significant progress in providing resources and enabling opportunities for members of the community to more easily and safely live a **more active way of life.**

## 5. Conclusion

As local communities work to protect the public health of their populations, there is a great need to emphasize active living as a key health-promoting measure. Although it is common to associate individual behaviors with levels of physical activity, it is now widely recognized that physical activity levels are largely determined by socioeconomic, structural, and environmental factors.<sup>5,6,7</sup> The responsibility to address these types of determinants, such as the urban and street designs in cities, fall upon local-level governments and community organizations. These actors have the capacity to address many barriers to physical activity by influencing local policies and initiatives, developing supporting infrastructure, providing community resources, and promoting education and awareness to help individuals to more easily and safely engage in physical activities.

Local actors in the WMA have made significant progress in providing resources and facilitating opportunities for members of the community to more easily and safely live a more active way of life. As these actors continue to cooperate, they will be able to work toward closing remaining gaps and ensuring greater equity throughout the community. It is also hoped that the experiences within the WMA may serve to guide and inspire other cities and metropolitan areas to promote similar actions, in order to achieve more active and healthy communities.

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