



On the **Frontier** Against **Obesity**

Ninia Baehr

Larry Bonderud is a mayor in the morning, an optometrist in the afternoon, and an advocate and role model for healthy living around the clock. Elected as mayor by the citizens of Shelby, Montana, for the past 18 years, he has developed a specialty in increasing healthy nutrition and physical activity opportunities for local residents.

Shelby, the county seat of Toole County, in Eastern Montana, has a population of 3,327. As with other isolated frontier towns, the area does not have a lavish public health budget, but that hasn't stopped Mayor Bonderud from working to create a healthy environment for his residents.

Most early summer mornings you can find him standing in the bed of a slow-moving pick-up truck, watering the hanging flower baskets that make Main Street more attractive to shoppers who might be enticed to walk, rather than drive, along it. During the school year, weather permitting, you might also see him escorting 100 or so children on "Walk and Wheel Wednesdays," part of Shelby's Safe Routes to School project. And before he does all this, you can certainly catch a glimpse of him on his daily three-mile walk.

Working for systemic change

Mayor Bonderud's most far-reaching efforts to prevent obesity and chronic diseases are in the areas of systemic policy and environmental change. He hasn't made these changes on his own, of course. He knows that any systemic change needs the support of Shelby's residents. He frequently includes surveys in the city newsletter to ask Shelby residents about their wants, needs, and opinions. Mayor Bonderud publicizes survey findings on a weekly radio program, which he pays for with passes for the radio station employees to the Civic Center and swimming pool. The local newspaper also includes survey findings in its free public service announcements. Based on the survey results, he pulls together stakeholders to develop action plans.

Some action items are costly. For instance, after gathering input from residents, Mayor Bonderud and the Shelby Parks and Recreation Committee (comprising a mix of city personnel and private citizens) determined that the town needed a fitness center. (This sentiment is common among frontier community members, according to a recent study conducted by the Montana Office of Rural Health.) In partnership with the local critical access hospital, the Marias Medical Center, he spearheaded an effort to install a fitness center in the Civic Center and to hire a full-time fitness trainer. He and his community partners also convinced major local employers to adopt policies to subsidize fitness center memberships for employees. The result: The fitness center is being used to its full capacity. Most days, the two cardio rooms are full, aerobic classes are using the entire gym floor, and young adults are enjoying the teen rooms. The schedule is so full, in fact, that new groups wanting to organize games and other events have difficulty getting on the calendar, and individuals often have to wait 30 or even 45 minutes for a treadmill to become available.

With the fitness center underway, the mayor and his committee of stakeholders went on to plan a six-mile paved walking/rolling trail that links the business district, residential neighborhoods, the Civic Center, the hospital, and schools to public lands. The trail's financing came from the City of Shelby, the Community Transportation Enhancement Program, the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Urban Recreational Trails Program, the Shelby Theme Committee, and in-kind contributions of labor and materials.

In 2006, Shelby received a \$4,000 planning grant from the Montana Nutrition and Physical Activity Program to Prevent Obesity and Other Chronic Diseases (NAPA), funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. NAPA's four goals are to increase physical activity, increase fruit and vegetable consumption, increase breastfeeding of infants, and promote "caloric balance."

Photo. A woman enjoys a summer walk on the town's new walking trail.

Shelby used the grant to conduct focus groups addressing NAPA's goal areas. Based on areas of interest identified by residents, NAPA and the city then collaborated to conduct systematic needs assessments and formative research addressing three specific areas: healthy food choices, use of the new walking trail, and support of breastfeeding.

HEALTHY FOOD CHOICES. To assess the nutrition environment, Shelby and NAPA sponsored a graduate student who used the Nutrition Environment Measures Survey (NEMS) to document availability, cost, and promotion of healthy food items in every grocery, convenience store, and restaurant in Shelby. The NEMS tool confirmed what residents had reported in focus groups: Healthy foods, especially in restaurants, were extremely limited.

In a follow-up survey sent to all Shelby households, Mayor Bonderud found that residents (especially parents) were overwhelmingly in favor of improving access to healthy foods in restaurants. Now he is making plans to work with restaurant managers and major food distributors serving Shelby to place healthier items on the menu. Once these choices are available, he hopes to conduct a promotional campaign (using bartered radio time and newspaper space, if necessary) to encourage residents to patronize the places offering healthy foods and to order the healthier items on the menu.

INCREASED USE OF WALKING TRAIL. To assess barriers and facilitative factors to using the new walking/rolling trail, Shelby and NAPA sponsored a graduate student to conduct six triad interviews, four with children aged 9 to 12, and two with parents of children aged 8 and under. Participants were asked to imagine both good and bad things that might happen if they used the trail. Good things included spending more time with family and friends, and bad things centered on being alone and getting hurt in an isolated area. NAPA contracted with social marketing experts at the Academy of Educational Development to craft a message to accentuate the good things and minimize the fear of bad things. The message, "Go Together—Use the Trail Every Day," will appear on every trail promotional item (posters, flyers, and so on) in combination with more targeted messages, such as "Start Them on the Right Track ... on the Shelby Trail," for parents of preschoolers. The social marketing campaign is ready to be launched this summer, as staff and financial resources permit.

SUPPORT OF BREASTFEEDING. To collect baseline data on breastfeeding rates in Shelby, the Marias Medical Center, the Toole County Health Department (located in Shelby), and NAPA developed a low-cost surveillance system. Each

year, about 50 babies are born at the Marias Medical Center. The county public health nurse calls each new mother to see if she needs information or resources. With the new surveillance system, when the nurse calls, she will also ask some questions about breastfeeding: Is the mother still breastfeeding? Is she also feeding her infant other foods? and Are there any factors that make it difficult (or that might make it easier) to continue breastfeeding? The nurse will enter this information into a simple online database and will repeat her calls and questions quarterly. In this way, the county can collect information to provide baseline data about Shelby's breastfeeding rates and help health care providers learn what interventions might increase breastfeeding initiation and duration.

NAPA and its partners hope that, once this affordable system for engaging in surveillance and conducting formative research is piloted in Shelby, it can be replicated in frontier communities across the state.

Shaping up Shelby

Another project Shelby is undertaking in partnership with the Marias Medical Center is to collect baseline data on physical and obesity-related behavioral indicators for at least 300 children and 650 adults, with the intention of repeating these measures in two years, in order to define the current problem.

Mayor Bonderud envisions the breastfeeding project, the launch of the social marketing campaign to jump-start use of the new trail, and the promotional campaign to encourage residents to eat more healthfully in local restaurants as components of a broader "Shape Up Shelby!" initiative. Through his leadership, the policy and environmental changes evolving in Shelby to combat obesity at the population level are making the town the site of a natural experiment. The baseline indicators project data will help the mayor and his community partners evaluate the outcomes of changes already taking place, as well as of future interventions.

Obesity rates are rising at a disproportionately high rate in rural communities, yet most of the research to test obesity-prevention strategies is taking place in urban and suburban areas. Shelby can serve as a "rural laboratory" for translating evidence-based obesity prevention strategies at the population level in frontier communities.

Whether Shelby serves as a model for other rural communities or not, however, Mayor Bonderud will keep doing what he has been doing for the past 18 years—creatively using all available resources to make Shelby a healthy and enjoyable place to live, learn, work, and play. ■

... the policy and environmental changes evolving in Shelby to combat obesity at the population level are making the town the site of a natural experiment.

Author

Ninia Baehr, MA, RN, is program manager of the Montana Nutrition and Physical Activity Program at Montana State University in Bozeman.

Resources

Active Living Resource Center.
www.activelivingresources.org

Montana Nutrition and Physical Activity Program.
montananapa.org