

Improving Access to the Transportation Alternatives Program for Rural Communities

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Abstract

Rural small towns with small main streets and compact downtown development can be ideal locations to create walkable communities. The Centers for Disease Controls and Prevention (CDC)'s High Obesity Program (HOP) funds Cooperative Extension programs to implement strategies to improve food access and support active transportation in high obesity (often rural) counties. The Louisiana State University (LSU) AgCenter HOP program had previously partnered with rural low-income communities to create Complete Streets plans but was challenged to find ways to implement those plans. A technical assistance webinar through the CDC provided by Safe Routes Partnership made the LSU AgCenter HOP team aware of new flexibility in the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP), a primary source for federal formula funding for bike and pedestrian infrastructure. Through ongoing engagement with the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, the local cost responsibility for the TAP for towns under 5,000 decreased from a previous approximate 40% cost burden to 5%, making TAP an accessible program for many rural communities. This paper describes how public health partnerships can improve access to active transportation funding. Although each state follows federal guidelines for the TAP program, there is substantial variation in state processes and local match requirements, which creates an opportunity for public health professionals to engage with state department of transportations to improve equity in TAP.

Keywords: active transportation, rural, Cooperative Extension, built environment

Rural communities experience higher burdens of chronic disease compared to urban communities (Samanic, 2020). Walkable communities are known to have lower rates of chronic disease such as hypertension and obesity (Wali et al., 2024). When supportive infrastructure is present in rural areas, residents report more leisure walking and transportation walking, activities that are important for preventing chronic disease (Whitfield et al., 2019). Supportive infrastructure is so salient for rural communities that the presence of infrastructure accounts for a substantial portion of the obesity gap between rural and urban communities (Wen et al., 2018).

Although vast areas of rural countryside have low population density, rural small towns with small main streets and compact downtown development can be ideal locations to create walkable communities. Rural communities may be assumed to be entirely car-dependent, but this ignores the economic and aging realities present in many rural communities. In low-income rural Louisiana communities, rates of households without a car may be higher than in urban communities, such as Ringgold (9.2%) or Tallulah (7.3%), as compared to the Louisiana state average of 3.2% (see final column of Table 1). Although the population of rural Louisiana accounts for only 26.8% of the state, rural Louisiana experiences over double the rate of pedestrian crash fatalities as urban areas (3.8% vs. 1.5%) (Sun & Sun, 2020). The small footprint of rural towns often results in destinations being within walkable distance for residents who live within the town limits. However, town layout, vehicular speeds, and supportive infrastructure influence whether a short distance is a feasible distance to walk (Müller et al., 2024). In some rural communities, behaviors of walking for transportation outpace urban areas. In a majority-Black sample of urban and rural South Carolina youth, rural youth walked more for transportation than urban youth, even though walkability scores were lower in rural areas (Bucko et al., 2021).

The Louisiana State University (LSU) AgCenter Healthy Communities initiative's emphasis on promoting activity-friendly routes to everyday destinations is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s High Obesity Program (HOP). HOP-funded Cooperative Extension agents partner with local communities to assess and implement strategies to improve food access and support active transportation (Holston et al., 2020). In Louisiana, HOP focuses on low-income, primarily rural communities. In recent years, the SNAP-Ed

Program has also become increasingly supportive of the same aims (Nutrition & Food Service, 2024; Stroepe et al., 2024). Cooperative Extension is the largest implementation agency of SNAP-Ed across the country,¹ which furthers the reach of Extension in supporting activity friendly routes to everyday destinations across the state. Cooperative Extension agents have significant relationships within their communities, often having hosted nutrition education classes through the local public library, the Council on Aging, and in public schools. Because of these relationships, Cooperative Extension is ideally situated to help rural communities identify and overcome barriers to active transportation (Stroepe et al., 2024).

Prior to 2023, the LSU AgCenter HOP team had partnered with rural low-income communities to create Complete Streets plans but was challenged to find ways to implement those plans, with local communities lacking resources for match dollars and often lacking in pedestrian fatalities that might make a town eligible for state safety dollars in Louisiana.² The Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) is a federal source for bike and pedestrian infrastructure that does not require evidence of crashes for communities to receive funding. (Federal Highway Administration, 2022). TAP was often mentioned by partners at the Louisiana Department of Transportation (DOTD) as a funding source for sidewalks. However, the program was inaccessible to rural communities due to the high cost burden, including a 20% local match and in Louisiana, local financial responsibility for design, construction, engineering, and inspection costs (Nunes et al., 2023). This paper describes how public health partnerships were effective in improving access and affordability of TAP for rural communities. Through the CDC's Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, HOP recipients (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024) such as the LSU AgCenter can receive technical assistance through organizations such as Safe Routes Partnership to assist with implementation. Although Extension partners have robust local relationships, they likely lack expertise in navigating complex state level institutional policy and system change. Safe Routes Partnership (SRP) is a national nonprofit organization working to advance safe walking and rolling to and from schools and in everyday life (*Safe Routes Partnership*, 2024a). SRP helped create the federal Safe Routes to School program in 2005 and continues to champion federal funding for walking and bicycling. For nearly 20 years, SRP has served a leading national role in helping communities access federal transportation funding

¹See [State SNAP-Ed Programs | SNAP-Ed \(usda.gov\)](#) for a complete list of implementing agencies by state.

² Although the pedestrian crash fatality rate is higher in the rural Louisiana than in urban areas, the raw

crash numbers for a particular rural community are typically lower when compared to an urban location (Sun & Sun, 2020).

to create safe, connected, and equitable places for people to walk and bike.

Table 1. Town Characteristics for 2023 Louisiana Transportation Alternatives Awards to Communities 10,000 and Under

Town Name	2023 TAP award*	Attended Rural Complete Streets Summit†	Population‡	%Black (non-His.)‡	%White (non-His.)‡	% walk or bike to work‡	No household vehicle ‡
Amite	\$809,00		4,005	59%	33%	0%	2%
Belle Rose	\$800,000	✓	2,030	60%	34%	3%	0%
Bunkie	\$1,199,318		3,362	55%	38%	12%	3%
Chataignier	\$1,645,110		290	48%	51%	3%	0%
Crowville§	\$1,000,000	✓	1,073	16%	84%	§	§
Franklin	\$655,604	✓	6,666	51%	41%	2%	2%
Jonesboro	\$1,075,320	✓	4,135	45%	46%	3%	2.6%
Lake Providence	\$2,000,000	✓	3,542	80%	19%	6%	3.1%
Paincourtville	\$600,000	✓	1,329	66%	24%	0%	0%
Ringgold	\$630,000	✓	1,686	58%	31%	2%	9.2%
Tallulah	\$181,440	✓	6,290	81%	17%	1%	7.3%
Vidalia	\$2,362,800	✓	3,994	24%	76%	1%	4.3%
Winnfield	\$1,000,000	✓	4,124	57%	37%	4%	6.1%
Louisiana			4,590,241	28%	61%	2%	3.2%

Source: *Louisiana Department of Transportation & Development, †Author, ‡American Community Survey 2022 5-year estimates, §unincorporated area, limited data availability (population data based on census block 3, Tract 9501)

TAP is a primary source of federal formula funding for infrastructure supportive of active transportation (The League of American Bicyclists, 2024). TAP is sub-allocated to states based on population size, with a portion of funding reserved for communities under 5,000 that cannot be spent on larger communities. Because of the high local burden to access these funds, the funding sub-allocated to small communities often went unspent and even at times returned to the federal government (Safe Routes Partnership, 2022). Prior to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), all TAP projects required a 20% local match, and in Louisiana, each local jurisdiction was additionally responsible for all design, construction, engineering, and inspection costs (totaling approximately an additional 20% of a project's cost) (Nunes et al., 2023). This made TAP functionally inaccessible for rural communities in Louisiana, with a \$500,000 TAP sidewalk project costing a rural community approximately \$200,000 of local funding. Unsurprisingly, Louisiana DOTD had substantial unspent funding designated for rural communities that had been untapped from previous TAP application cycles (Federal Highway Administration, 2021). To improve access and implementation of TAP, new provisions within the IIJA were included to give states flexibility on the local match (Surface Transportation Block Grant, 2021).

Process

The physical activity specialist for the LSU AgCenter became aware of changes to federal law guiding TAP through a CDC Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity (DNPAO) webinar with Safe Routes Partnership, and reached out to the Louisiana DOTD to see if new provisions in the IIJA giving states flexibility on the local match for TAP could be implemented in Louisiana to make TAP an accessible program for low-income rural communities. As part of CDC DNPAO-funded technical assistance to LSU AgCenter HOP, Safe Routes Partnership provided mentoring phone calls and prepared a memo using data on state implementation of TAP from its biannual state report cards to develop a roadmap for LSU AgCenter HOP. The memo paired data on how the program had been implemented over the prior decade with new provisions in the IIJA. This memo included possible ways DOTD could use new flexibility in the law to make TAP funding more accessible to Louisiana's rural communities. The memo underscored the fact that Louisiana had over \$8 million of available funds designated for rural communities in the TAP program— funding exclusively available for communities under 5,000 (Federal Highway Administration, 2021). Relatedly, Louisiana had transferred over \$25.6 million out of TAP, in part due to lack of applications from rural communities (Safe Routes

Partnership, 2022). Safe Routes Partnership also provided comparison data from other states' TAP programs to showcase the range of implementation possibilities. The TAP manager was eager to improve access for rural communities, but multiple layers of institutional approvals within both DOTD and the Louisiana division office of Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) had to be secured. The TAP manager had administered a recent rural TAP school sidewalks project that failed to move forward due to the high local cost; this example was pivotal in illustrating to DOTD and FHWA leaders the need for reduced local match for rural towns. Specific examples of HOP communities who had not applied to TAP due to barriers in the application process (such as requiring a cost estimate funded by the rural town) and the high local cost burden also helped communicate the need for change. Each idea proposed as a possible solution to make Louisiana TAP more affordable and accessible had to be vetted by multiple sections within DOTD and by FHWA. The LSU AgCenter's physical activity specialist provided ongoing momentum to keep this desired policy change moving forward, even as multiple solutions were deemed unfeasible by a DOTD section or FHWA office. After months of meetings and rejected ideas, the TAP manager from DOTD created a solution acceptable to all parties at DOTD and FHWA.

Outcomes

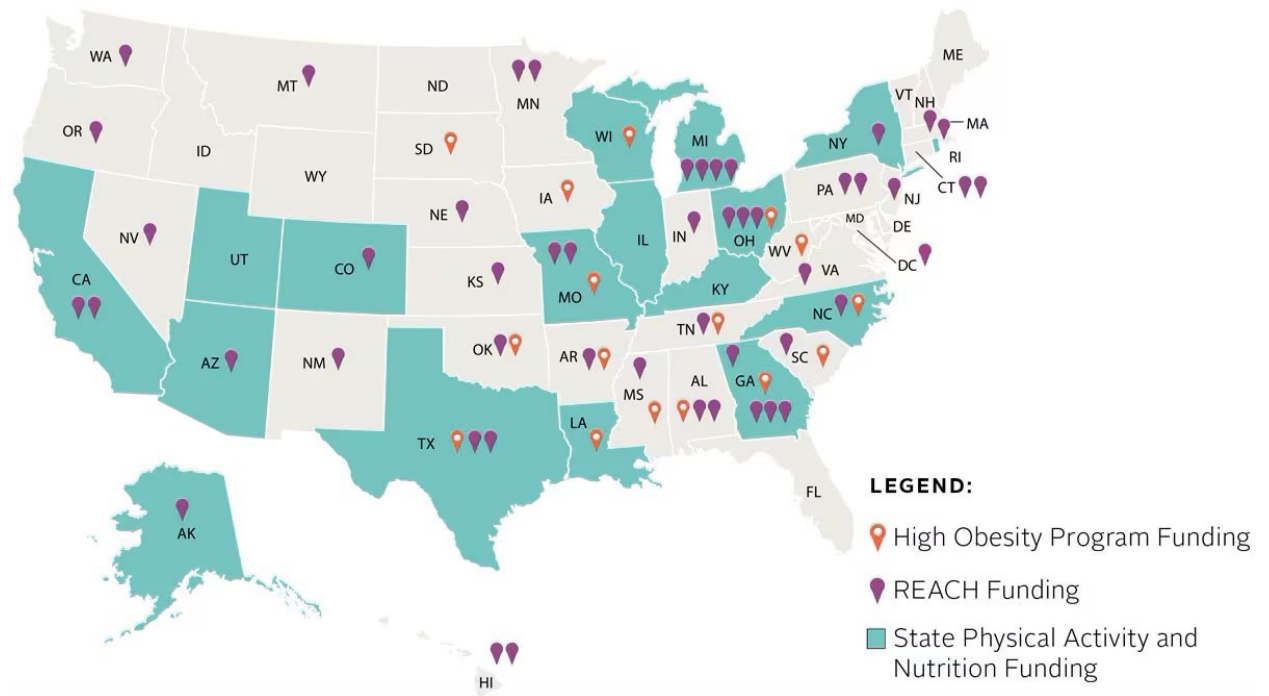
Through mentoring with Safe Routes Partnership and engagement with DOTD, the local match for TAP was lowered to 5% for communities under 5,000 and 10% for communities 5,000-49,999. Design, construction engineering, and inspection costs were also changed from local responsibility to DOTD responsibility for all communities under 50,000. This change was accomplished without increasing costs for urban communities through capturing the engineering and design costs provided by urban communities that had not previously been counted. Prior to the IIJA, each local jurisdiction was required to provide a 20% match; the IIJA allows all projects within a state to cumulatively contribute a 20% match. Cities have engineers and planners on staff who design their own TAP projects. By counting the in-house engineering and planning contributions of urban communities, DOTD was able to lower the cash match for smaller communities without increasing costs for communities over 50,000. Additionally, the LSU AgCenter addressed barriers to TAP

through significant engagement with rural communities, including hosting a Rural Complete Streets Summit, leading community walk audits, facilitating Q&A calls about the TAP application process with rural community leaders and DOTD, and providing technical assistance for application development. All 10 rural communities who attended the Rural Complete Streets Summit and submitted TAP applications were funded. Rural communities under 5,000 received over 13 million in funding for sidewalk infrastructure, with an additional \$837,044 for communities between 5,000-10,000. See Table 1 for descriptive characteristics of the communities with populations of 10,000 and fewer funded through 2023 the Louisiana Transportation Alternatives Awards. All funded rural projects are in Justice40 communities, a White House initiative to address inequities in underinvested communities (The White House, 2022). Since award acceptance, Cooperative Extension agents are continuing to work with rural communities to aid in successful in TAP implementation.

Discussion

Cooperative Extension is well positioned to help low-income and rural communities engage in the transportation planning process (Stroope et al., 2024). The FY2024 SNAP-Ed Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) Change Data Toolkit includes expanded items related to Complete Streets, such as work related to adopting Complete Streets policies, transportation agency scoring criteria modification to improve access, and ordinance adoption (United States Department of Agriculture, 2024). However, Extension partners may need support to engage in state level policy and systems change. One such starting point is the Making Strides: State Report Cards on Support for Walking, Bicycling, and Physical Activity (Safe Routes Partnership, 2024b). Just as this served as a first step for LSU AgCenter HOP's roadmap, this report provides a one-page snapshot for each state on areas of strength and areas of opportunity for improvement. Detailed information within the report and supplemental resources scaffolds each indicator of the state report cards offering insight into how to make change, along with examples from other states. Most states have at least one funded recipient of DNPAO funding, and Extension and other public health partners can connect with funded recipients to collaborate on accessing technical assistance from national partners and experts (see Figure 1 for recipient map). Additionally, Extension partners are encouraged to reach out to statewide and national organizations working to improve walking and bicycling, like Safe Routes Partnership, to collaborate on efforts. Often state and national groups can help troubleshoot challenges and identify future opportunities.

Figure 1
CDC DNPAO SPAN, HOP, REACH funding by state. Source: CDC DNPAO



Likely the most important aspect of Extension’s role in the change in match for Louisiana TAP was persistence. Partners at DOTD and FHWA, while fully agreeing with the need to make programs more accessible and affordable for rural and low-income communities, would have been unlikely to move this policy change to completion without the ongoing support from Extension. Institutional change—particularly when involving multiple layers of approvals—is unlikely to move forward without a person who has designated time to sustain momentum. In this case, Safe Routes Partnership’s coaching and expertise played an instrumental role in identifying feasible, state-specific opportunities from the changes to TAP in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act identifying, while also providing ongoing encouragement and support to the Cooperative Extension specialist.

Each state follows federal guidelines for the TAP, however, there is substantial variation in state processes and local match requirements, which creates an opportunity for public health professionals to engage with state departments of transportations to improve access to TAP. Infrastructure funding supportive of active transportation is possible for rural low-income communities to obtain, but public health engagement may be needed to help communities navigate state processes. Cooperative Extension and other public health practitioners benefit from support to successfully engage in this work. Understanding

what was successful in Louisiana may provide a roadmap for other states.

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