

# Collective Impact Case Study: Shape Up Somerville



Discovering better ways  
to solve social problems

## Summary

Shape Up Somerville (SUS) is a city-wide collective impact campaign to reduce obesity by engaging schools, city government, civic organizations, community groups, businesses, and other people who live in, work in, and visit the city of Somerville, Mass. The effort has made significant changes for the city through programming, physical infrastructure improvements, and policy work.

### Key Facts

**Initiative / backbone name:** Shape Up Somerville

**Year initiative formed:** 2003

**Mission:** To take a community-based, participatory, environmental approach to prevent obesity for the people who live in, work in, or visit Somerville

**Geography:** Somerville, MA

**Impact area(s):** Health

## Problem

Much like the rest of the country, the youth of the city of Somerville, Mass., faced an obesity epidemic.

- By 2003, 44% of all youth were overweight or obese.
- The rate of obesity was disproportionately high among racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>1</sup>
- Studies showed that overweight adolescents had a 70% chance of becoming overweight or obese adults.<sup>2</sup>

The city needed proactive strategies to support obesity prevention for both youth and adults. Unfortunately, most previous solutions were not as comprehensive or collaborative as necessary.

## Collective Impact Beginnings

Professor Christina Economos and colleagues from the Friedman School of Nutrition at Tufts University realized that change was urgently needed to ensure the lifelong health of children and adults in their community. The university partnered with the City of Somerville to begin a three-year research trial, with core funding from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), focused on creating environmental change to prevent obesity in early-elementary school children.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A Decade of Shape Up Somerville: Assessing Childhood Obesity Measures 2002-2011. Accessed June 2013.

<http://www.somervillema.gov/sites/default/files/SUS-BMI-ReportFINAL-4-12-2013.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The Alliance for a Healthier Generation. Accessed June 2013.

<http://www.ph.ucla.edu/chs/nfsc/Online%20Resources/The%20Alliance%20for%20a%20Healthier%20Generation.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Tufts University Gerald J. and Dorothy R. Friedman School of Nutrition and Health Policy: Shape Up Somerville. Accessed June, 2013. <http://www.nutrition.tufts.edu/index.php?q=research/shapeup-somerville>

Together, the university and city agreed to create a multi-sector effort focused on making coordinated interventions in before-, during-, and after-school environments. In order to spark a call to action, data illustrating the extent of the obesity epidemic was collected. Focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and community meetings were held to share this data, gather input on which solutions were likely to be the most effective, and design a pilot program.

Based on positive results from the pilot program, the initiative was expanded and today focuses not just on youth, but all residents and those who live and work in Somerville.

## Structure

Backbone support for Shape Up Somerville is provided by a team within the Somerville city government. Fifteen organizations serve as partners for the initiative, including city departments, the Somerville School Committee, and community-based and statewide organizations. The entire initiative is overseen by a steering committee that has representation from over 25 stakeholder groups, including representatives from each of the partner organizations.<sup>4</sup>

Shape Up Somerville pursues a broad range of strategies and projects to influence systems, policy, and environmental change to increase access to physical activity and healthy eating for all residents, visitors, and people who work in Somerville. The initiative engages and works to influence the ways that multiple systems – the education system, the health system, the government – do their work.

## Results

Shape Up Somerville's major success has been a significant decrease in weight and body mass index (BMI) – key indicators of obesity – among the community's young children. In an initial study from 2003 – 2005, the average weight of children in Somerville went down one pound in one school year, a statistically significant impact, while the weight of children in the control group communities increased one pound. These results were achieved through strategies such as:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The members of the steering committee include: Somerville Public Schools, Tufts University, Haitian Coalition, Representatives from the Community, Representatives from the Brazilian Community, the Greater Boston Nepalese Community, City of Somerville Traffic and Parking, The Welcome Project, Cambridge Health Alliance, Groundwork Somerville, City of Somerville Council on Aging, City of Somerville Veterans Services, Somerville Americans with Disabilities Act Coordinator, Head Start, Somerville Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator, the Somerville Homeless Coalition, Cores, and the City of Somerville Parks and Open Spaces Program.

<sup>5</sup> A Decade of Shape Up Somerville: Assessing Childhood Obesity Measures 2002-2011. Accessed June 2013. <http://www.somervillema.gov/sites/default/files/SUS-BMI-ReportFINAL-4-12-2013.pdf>

- **Enhancing food options:** Over 40 restaurants across the city offered healthy options on their menus.
- **Changed quality and quantity of healthy foods for students:** Schools increased the amount of healthy fruits and vegetables that were available for students and eliminated unhealthy options like ice-cream.
- **Trained educators and changed school policy:** More than 50 local clinicians and school nurses were trained on a new toolkit designed to assess and address children who are overweight.
- **New and improved park:** The City has renovated 17 parks and added four new parks increasing the city's open space inventory by 2.05 acres.

## Five Conditions of Collective Impact

### Common Agenda

The original goal of Shape Up Somerville was to take “a community-based, participatory, environmental approach to prevent childhood obesity by transforming a community and informing social change at the national level by examining the effectiveness of the model on the prevention of undesirable weight gain in children.”<sup>6</sup> This goal has expanded to include all residents, visitors, and people who work in Somerville and has been accepted as a shared goal by the initiative's partners

### Shared Measurement

After multiple discussions with community partners and the wider community, Shape Up Somerville decided to focus on measuring general statistics of obesity for children through three key measures: increases in energy expenditures (EE) beyond increases in EE and energy, BMI z-score, and weight. Results are collected through school surveys and parent surveys. The initial data illustrating the success of the initiative was communicated through scientific journals and community-wide presentations. Today, a 10 year BMI report is available on the initiative's website

### Mutually Reinforcing Activities

All of the organizations involved in Shape Up Somerville have committed to the overall goal and vision articulated in the common agenda. Partners are seeking to advance the array of coordinated strategies needed to address obesity and are making clear progress on the shared measures being reported to the community.

The initiative's strategies seek to reinforce each other to have a “multiplier effect” on the impact created. For example, a *Safe Routes to School* workgroup has pursued a number of strategies, including promotion of “walking school-busses”, implementing a park and walk program for parents who have to drive, and creating a “no idling zone” program through environmental change, education, and

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<sup>6</sup> Economos, Christina. Catalyzing Communities to Reduce Obesity. Accessed June 2013.

[http://www.healthyfoodshealthymoves.org/conference/HFHM\\_Economos.pdf](http://www.healthyfoodshealthymoves.org/conference/HFHM_Economos.pdf)

enforcement. Meanwhile, the City working with partners has improved the pedestrian and bicycling infrastructure throughout the community (e.g., bike racks / lanes / sharrows, wider sidewalks, and improved crosswalks) for the community.

### Continuous Communication

Continuous communication happens both within and between initiatives. Within initiatives, regular meetings are complemented by initiative-specific websites that communicate progress and clearly lay out strategies, dashboards, and success stories.

Additionally, local and national media (TV, radio, newspaper advertisements) have been engaged and several newsletters have been disseminated to communicate the initiative's progress to the wider community. About 20,000 community members have been reached through a monthly newspaper column and 353 community partners have been reached through six newsletters.

### Backbone Support

The city government of Somerville serves as the backbone organization for the initiative. The backbone consists of a four-person team: a part-time mobile farmers market manager, a part-time intern working on various projects, a full-time coordinator organizing partners in areas such as the restaurant program, and a director responsible for managing work such as the worksite wellness program. The initial funding for these positions was provided by Tufts University through a \$1.5 million CDC grant and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Currently, the majority of Shape Up Somerville's backbone staff and activities are funded through the health department of the City of Somerville, which in turn is supported by taxpayers. The funding is reapproved every year in the city's annual budget.<sup>7</sup>

## Lessons Learned

**Engage the wider community:** Especially during the planning process, listening and taking community members' opinions into account was critical. As one member of Shape Up Somerville said, "During your planning year, really listen. Take the attitude that you can learn from others."<sup>8</sup> Members of Shape Up Somerville credit this listening campaign to much of their later success. To that end, they held four forums for parents in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole. In addition to the forums, Shape Up Somerville reached out to parents through community events, local media outlets, and the Parent Teacher Association. The initiative also shared what they had learned; each month Shape Up Somerville sent home a parent newsletter to over 500 families and a community newsletter to over 200 community members. These newsletters contained updates on the project, health tips, and coupons for healthy food.

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<sup>7</sup> City of Somerville: Shape Up Somerville. Accessed June 2013. <http://www.somervillema.gov/departments/health/sus>; City of Somerville: Fiscal Year 2014 Budget. Accessed June 2013. <http://www.somervillema.gov>

<sup>8</sup> FSG Interviews and Analysis

**Enforce accountability:** Both during the planning and implementation process, Shape Up Somerville used mechanisms like memorandums of understanding (MOU) and contracts to hold participating organizations accountable. They found that being clear and putting things in writing helped reinforce commitment and accountability of all participating groups.<sup>9</sup> This has been especially true when it comes to grantmaking decisions. For anything larger than \$5,000, Shape Up Somerville puts a contract in place. For annual funding under \$5,000, Shape Up Somerville develops a MOU with specific expectations for the initiatives the partner is being funded to do.

**Build relationships outside your “issue”:** Shape Up Somerville found that the best way to get people excited about the specific issue of childhood obesity was to engage with the community as much as possible and get excited about other important issues in turn. In order to build trust, they “said yes” to helping others in the community whenever they could, even when doing so had no direct link to their work. In return, community stakeholders who did not have a direct stake in Shape Up Somerville’s anti-obesity agenda spread their message as well. As one Shape Up Somerville participant advised, “Put your agenda aside to build relationships and trust. Support other initiatives and issues in a community even if they have no direct link to your work.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## Contact

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