

# Evaluation of Active Living Research

## Ten Years of Progress in Building a New Field

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**Background:** The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Active Living Research (ALR) program commissioned an evaluation of its initiative to assess 10 years (2001–2011) of progress in establishing a new interdisciplinary field to develop and translate research focused on policy and environmental factors affecting physical activity in children and families.

**Purpose:** The second-phase evaluation (ALR-2) was conducted from March to July 2011 to measure progression from evidence- and field-building (Goals 1 and 2) to policy and practice contributions (Goal 3) to inform childhood obesity strategies, and to develop recommendations for a third phase (ALR-3).

**Methods:** The evaluation was a retrospective, in-depth descriptive study utilizing qualitative and quantitative methods. Key informant interviews (N=100) across seven stakeholder groups were conducted and analyzed in 2011. Data from web-based surveys of grantee investigators conducted from 2007 to 2011 and analyzed in 2011 served as the primary quantitative source.

**Results:** Key indicators of ALR's overall progress confirmed ALR's success across its three goals: (1) establishing a strong research base: 309 publications filling major knowledge gaps; (2) building an interdisciplinary and diverse field: grantees represented 31 disciplines, with more than one quarter (28%) of investigators having  $\leq 5$  years of experience, of which 39% were people of color; and (3) using research to inform policy and practice: 62 examples, of which slightly more than one half ( $n=32$ ) resulted in actual policy or practice change.

**Conclusions:** Overall, ALR met its three goals during ALR-2 and was well positioned to implement a third phase of the program to further accelerate the translation of its research into policy and practice.

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### Introduction

In 2011, Active Living Research (ALR) celebrated its tenth year as a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) national research program. From its inception, ALR has guided the field of physical activity toward a more multilevel ecologic approach,<sup>1</sup> building an interdisciplinary cadre of researchers studying the effects of environmental factors and policies on physical activity among all ages of Americans. When RWJF changed its focus to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic, ALR shifted its emphasis, redesigning its mission for its second phase of funding (ALR-2) by focusing on environmental

and policy research to inform childhood obesity prevention strategies. Its formal goals were threefold: (1) establish a strong research base to identify and evaluate solutions to childhood obesity support; (2) continue to build a vibrant interdisciplinary and diverse field of researchers; and (3) facilitate the use of research to guide and accelerate effective action and policy change. As discussed in a companion paper describing ALR activities,<sup>2</sup> the \$37-million 10-year program supported research grants; commissioned papers and analyses; journal supplements and special issues; research translation grants; an annual conference; seminars; an online database of policy and environmentally focused physical activity and obesity-related papers; and various communication efforts (i.e., research reviews and syntheses, issue briefs, fact sheets, webinars, and a newsletter) disseminated through the ALR website and social media channels.

In anticipation of a potential third round of funding, ALR program leadership commissioned the Public Health

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Institute to conduct an evaluation of ALR-2 to measure progress in achieving its goals by examining short- and long-term outcomes outlined in the Program's 2007 logic model.<sup>2</sup> An earlier evaluation examining the Program's initial 5 years indicated that ALR had achieved considerable progress on two shorter-term outcome areas, expanding the actionable evidence base and growing a transdisciplinary community of investigators, and some growth in the indicators associated with the third shorter-term outcome, growth in visibility, as well as one of three longer-term outcomes, creating a self-sustaining field of research. Progress toward the second longer-term outcome, informing the policy debate and interventions, was minor, with a high likelihood of further contribution in the future.<sup>3</sup> The third long-term outcome, an actionable evidence base, was not examined, as it was collectively agreed by program leadership that it was premature to measure these indicators. Because both ALR and RWJF intended that ALR would ultimately affect policy and environment change to support active living, a considerable component of the ALR-2 evaluation examined the progression from building the knowledge and investigator base to translating this information for use by practitioners, advocates, and policymakers to change policy and practice.

As discussed by Gutman and colleagues in the earlier evaluation,<sup>3</sup> policy change is an intricate, complicated process, with research being one of many potentially influential factors. Frameworks depicting the policy change process<sup>4–7</sup> suggest that research, if it does have a bearing on specific policy change, may influence different policy change agents at different points in time, and in varying ways. Further, once policy is enacted, the implementation of the policy into practice may be convoluted, lengthy, and nonsustaining.

This article presents evaluation findings at one point in time, spring 2011, about a year prior to the end of the second phase of the ALR program. It summarizes ALR's accomplishments in reaching its shorter-term outcomes and further addressing two (i.e., self-sustaining field of research and informing the policy debate and interventions) of the three longer-term outcomes. As the 2011 evaluation did not measure indicators of an actionable evidence base (i.e., study citations, use of reliable measures, and evidence of intervention effectiveness) because of resource constraints, this article does not address this third longer-term outcome. The article concludes with a discussion of gaps between the evaluation recommendations for ALR-3 and the current focus of the Program.

## Methods

The 2011 evaluation was a retrospective, in-depth descriptive study, guided by the program's conceptual framework<sup>3,8</sup> and logic model,<sup>2</sup>

and utilizing multiple methods to analyze both qualitative and quantitative data. Primary data collection took place from March through May 2011, with analysis conducted from May to July 2011.

## Qualitative Methods

Key informant interviews, conducted by the authors and program staff at See Change, Inc., a subcontractor to the Public Health Institute, were the main qualitative method. A total of 100 interviews were conducted, with seven categories of informants: RWJF staff and advisors and National Program Office (NPO) staff ( $n=20$ ); ALR National Advisory Committee (NAC) and Senior Advisors ( $n=7$ ); RWJF obesity prevention program ([www.rwjf.org/en/about-rwjf/program-areas/childhood-obesity.html](http://www.rwjf.org/en/about-rwjf/program-areas/childhood-obesity.html)) leaders ( $n=10$ ); other funders ( $n=13$ ); academic leaders and private sector leaders ( $n=10$ ); policy and advocacy organization leaders ( $n=25$ ); and state and local practitioners ( $n=15$ ). For each of the first six categories, the evaluation team compiled a tentative list of interviewees, all known to have some familiarity with ALR, and following input from the NPO and RWJF, scheduled interviews. State and local practitioners were chosen at random from lists of CDC State Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Program Directors, and the RWJF Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities grantees, respectively.

Semi-structured interview protocols were developed for each grouping of informants, and then piloted in simulated interviews. All interview protocols included open-ended questions on the respondent's familiarity and involvement with ALR and its products; perceptions of ALR's contribution to policy and practice, and its collaborations with other RWJF programs and the field; and recommendations for the next phase of the program and for long-term sustainability. The majority of interviews were conducted by telephone, with the exception of those with the NPO and three RWJF staff. Data from interviews were coded using a coding scheme aligned with the program outcomes, double-checked by the research team, and then organized by informant group to extract themes and quotations. Finally, major themes, exemplary quotations, and other information were integrated across informant groups, reviewed, and then analyzed by the investigators.

To examine more closely policy and practice contributions, examples from the key informant interviews were extracted and merged with data from open-ended questions from the 2008–2011 ALR Impact Surveys covering the years 2007 to 2010 and were analyzed using a three-level typology, developed by the investigators. The ten examples of policy contribution cited by the earlier evaluation and compiled from key informant interviews conducted in 2006<sup>3</sup> also were reanalyzed using this typology.

## Quantitative Methods

The primary quantitative method utilized in the 2011 evaluation was the 2011 ALR Impact Survey, a web-based survey of ALR-supported investigators developed and conducted by the NPO and analyzed by the NPO in collaboration with the evaluation team.<sup>9</sup> The 2011 ALR Impact Survey, consisting of 29 items, was sent to all principal investigators awarded ALR grants from 2002 to 2010 in February 2011. Data collection was completed in March 2011 following several subsequent reminders to participate. As an incentive, all respondents were entered into a drawing for an Apple iPad. Altogether, 128 of 160 grantee investigators (80%) responded.

As noted above, policy and practice examples provided by respondents to open-ended questions asked in the 2008–2011 ALR Impact Surveys also were analyzed. These surveys were similar in their questioning, with a modification made in 2011 to the policy impact question to separate communication efforts from those of policy contribution and impact.

In addition, the evaluation team analyzed NPO program databases to gather information on grant profiles, grantee publications, NPO products, conference attendees, and web usage. Data from several of these databases are available in the companion article<sup>2</sup> and helped support conclusions in this article.

## Results

### Goal 1: Establish a Strong Research Base

Cumulatively, over the period from 2001 to 2011, ALR made a major contribution to the knowledge base for research on the environment and policy factors that promote physical activity, as evidenced by the large number of grantee publications ( $n=309$ )<sup>2</sup> and confirmed by key informant interviews. Academic and private sector leaders and funder key informants, for example, generally thought that ALR was central to expanding the published research on active living, filling in major gaps in knowledge, and synthesizing and disseminating findings both from ALR as well as from the field at large. As one informant stated: “ALR has probably done more to move this whole field of active living forward than anything before or anything that has come since.” Another commented that ALR helped shape the focus from randomized trials to “different types of design and different ways of evaluating” more appropriate to community research.

### Goal 2: Build a Vibrant Interdisciplinary and Diverse Field of Researchers

The ALR program has successfully built a diverse and interdisciplinary field of researchers committed to active living research. Key informants strongly endorsed the idea that ALR, through its annual conferences, specialty seminars, and proposal selection criteria, has been critical in stimulating and supporting partnerships and collaborations among researchers from a wide variety of disciplines. Responses to the 2011 ALR Impact Survey indicated that grantee research teams represented 31 disciplines ranging from health-related (epidemiology, health sciences, medicine, nursing, nutrition, public health and statistics) to recreation-and-leisure-related science (physical activity/exercise science and recreation/leisure science) to physical environment-related (architecture, engineering, environmental science, geography, landscape architecture, transportation, and urban planning/urban design) to social science-related (anthropology, behavioral science, child development, criminology/criminal justice, education,

psychiatry, psychology, public administration and sociology) to policy science-related (business, economics, law, policy studies, political science, and public policy). Public health was the most widely reported discipline (58% of respondents), followed by physical activity/exercise science (40%) and urban planning/urban design (38%). As one interviewee from the academic leader category commented, “By virtue of connecting the dots, ALR has brought those historically divergent interests and organizations together, and not just raised awareness, but created collaborations and synergy among those various organizations.” Grantee respondents to the 2011 ALR Impact Survey also indicated a high level of new cross-disciplinary collaborations both inside (57% of all respondents) and outside (71% of all respondents) their primary institutions.

Further evidence that active living research is now a legitimate and important research field can be seen in the number of young investigators engaged in these studies and the career opportunities available to active living researchers. In 2011, slightly more than one quarter (28%) of principal investigators (PIs) surveyed in the 2011 ALR Impact Survey had 5 years of experience or less conducting research, of which almost two fifths (39%) were people of color. ALR grants to support dissertation research and to fund young investigators with expertise in high-risk population groups in partnership with the RWJF New Connections program,<sup>2</sup> as well as the readiness of ALR PIs to mentor students related to this research area (42% of 2011 ALR Impact Survey respondents) and to create new courses related to active living (11% of respondents) and/or embed new active living research content in courses (51% of respondents), have appeared to inspire the next generation of researchers in this field. As one key informant stated about student applications, “We have students now who say they want to specialize in active living research or professional practice...ten years ago nobody would... and I attribute a lot of that to ALR.”

In reference to career opportunities, almost one quarter (24%) of all 2011 ALR Impact Survey respondents stated that their ALR grant had at least partially contributed to consulting opportunities in 2010. Several respondents indicated that their ALR research had at least partially aided new employment opportunities or advancements (15%) and/or advancements in a professional organization (9%) in 2010. Moreover, ALR grantees received \$127 million in additional funding from other agencies from 2001 to 2011,<sup>9</sup> indicating that several federal, state, and philanthropic entities had embraced funding for policy and environmental research on physical activity. This is further supported by key informant reports that indicate that ALR has stimulated

and helped shape the research agenda for at least one NIH institute (e.g., the National Cancer Institute) and those of some private foundations.

### Goal 3: Facilitate the Use of Research to Guide and Accelerate Effective Action and Policy Change

The evaluation team developed a three-level typology, building on the work of Ottoson<sup>5</sup> and Weiss<sup>6,7</sup> and their respective colleagues, to distinguish the influence of ALR research on policy and practice: **Level One:** communication effort, meaning activities that the ALR NPO and grantee investigators undertook to inject research evidence into the policy and practice process, such as distributing materials to policymakers, advocates, and practitioners and/or meeting in person to provide written or verbal input, including testimonies, into proposed policies, regulations, and/or legislation; **Level Two:** research contribution to policy and/or practice, defined as situations where research evidence or findings were actually or were perceived to be utilized in the policy and/or practice process but the policy and/or practice did not change in the direction indicated or the effect has yet to be determined; and **Level Three:** research impact on policy and/or practice, defined as situations where research findings were actually or were perceived to be utilized in the policy and/or practice process and the policy and/or practice did change in the direction that the evidence indicated.

**Level One: communication effort.** As described in the companion paper in this issue,<sup>2</sup> ALR broadened its communication outreach efforts to the policy and practice community during ALR-2. To examine this interface between ALR and the policy and practice community, the evaluation team explored the dissemination of evidence to the end users from the knowledge producers, the ALR grantee investigators and the NPO. Input from two end-user groups, state and local practitioners (n=15) and representatives of policy and advocacy organizations (n=25), are discussed below.

**Knowledge producers.** Not only have ALR grantees been prolific in their efforts to disseminate their findings to the research community,<sup>2</sup> more than two fifths (41%) of 2011 ALR Impact Survey respondents reported at least one communication with policymakers/advocates/practitioners during 2010. These efforts ranged from in-person meetings (52%) to invited presentations (23%) to material distribution (16%) to telephone briefings (6%) to testimonies at policy hearings (3%). Grantee respondents also offered a few examples where the reach of ALR research had migrated from local influence to national

(e.g., bicycle master plan in Portland OR), from state to state (e.g., California to Louisiana), and cross-national boundaries (e.g., Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Netherlands). Recognizing the need to further encourage and assist investigators in translating their research to policymakers and practitioners, ALR-2 in 2010 began to provide research translation funds to develop communication products for the policy/practice community.<sup>2</sup>

The NPO also increased its own efforts during ALR-2 to summarize the state of the field for nonresearch audiences by disseminating research briefs, reviews, and syntheses (including accompanying synopses in the form of issue briefs and fact sheets), and a bimonthly newsletter.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the NPO played an active role in shaping major policy documents (e.g., *The National Physical Activity Plan*)<sup>10</sup> and proposals such as two state initiatives (California and Virginia) mandating physical activity time in schools.

The NPO employed various outreach mechanisms to directly engage the policy and practice community vis-à-vis website, webinars, seminars, one-to-one technical assistance, and the annual conference, which averages around 300 attendees yearly. As indicated in the companion paper,<sup>2</sup> ALR-2 expanded its web presence by adding the ALR YouTube channel, a “Move!” blog, a Facebook page, and Twitter chat. The website also was modified to be more user-friendly to nonresearchers.

#### **Knowledge end users: state and local practitioners.**

Practitioners working at the state level were more familiar with ALR resources than local practitioners who were less likely to differentiate between ALR contributions and another RWJF Program, Active Living by Design. Although the overall contributions of ALR research may have been somewhat ambiguous to many local and state practitioners, both groups offered specific examples of policy contributions derived from ALR work (Table 1). Both state and local practitioners expressed a need for material that was less academic and more accessible to policymakers and community members. Whereas local practitioners sought more qualitative information including more tangible examples of best practices, case studies, and stories, state practitioners desired bulleted and pragmatic information for meetings that was “quick, down and dirty” and could link research to policy action.

**Knowledge end users: leaders of policy and advocacy organizations.** Compared to the results of the earlier evaluation,<sup>3</sup> the level of direct contact between policy and advocacy organizations and ALR had increased considerably, and the contact appeared to be more content-specific. All but a few policy and advocate informants

interviewed in 2011 had at least some familiarity with ALR, citing close working and personal relationships with Jim Sallis and others at the NPO as well as attendance at conferences (60%), use of ALR research briefs (at least some familiarity: 80%) and the website (at least some familiarity: 76%). ALR research and resources during ALR-2 also appeared to have informed strategic planning at several organizations, injecting health issues into built environment–related dialogues, and leading to a greater focus on childhood obesity.

Informants offered specific examples of ALR's contributions to policy and practice (Table 1). However, there were varying viewpoints on the reach of ALR-supported evidence. In general, penetration into the policy and advocacy arena appeared primarily among those informants proactively seeking this information. A few policy and advocacy organizations with wide distribution networks and/or responsibilities for training their members indicated that their organization had shared ALR resources with their constituents. Most, however, suggested that ALR research was not adequately reaching frontline activists or policymakers who can move research into reality. ALR translational information was viewed as too academic, presenting facts but few narratives to frame the issues. Further, materials often lacked action steps describing how best to use the research findings to affect policy. Key informants also requested greater collaboration among ALR and advocacy organizations, elected officials, and community members.

**Levels Two and Three: research contribution and Impact.** The evaluation team sought evidence of the role and nature of ALR research in informing policy debates and influencing practice. Because the time frame for measuring the influence of research on policy and practice is complicated by the lengthy research pipeline from grant award to publication and dissemination, only nine examples of specific policy contribution were attributed to ALR during ALR-1 (the tenth example, research brief distribution, was reclassified under Level One).<sup>3</sup> The ALR-2 evaluation, combining information from the key informant interviews and the 2008–2011 ALR Impact Surveys, yielded 53 examples of ALR research informing specific policy and practice. Altogether, across the 10 years, slightly more than one half ( $n=32$ ) resulted in actual policy or practice change (Level Three).

Table 1 describes specific examples of ALR research impact (Level Three) on actual policy and practice change. Of the 32 examples, 17 describe implementation of plans to improve bicycle- and pedestrian-related structures; 11 involve school-related policy/practice change, of which three relate to the adoption of new or

revised Safe Routes to School policies, three address changes at parks and playgrounds, and one adds new measurement (BMI) to a statewide registry. These examples contrast with those at Level Two where research contribution primarily involved input into the development of state or local master plans (e.g., bicycle, pedestrian, and trail) or guidelines (e.g., parks and playgrounds, school physical activity requirements) that had not yet been implemented at the time of the evaluation (data not shown).

Table 1 also indicates the range of decision-maker types and levels where ALR has been influential, showing a predominant influence (75%) on local (i.e., regional, school district, county and city) government. The range and diversity of ALR research influence on policy and practice extends from legislators and managers at the tribal and state level to school district officials to managers located across regional, county, and city departments (e.g., planning, public health, recreation, transportation, and zoning).

## **Recommendations for the Future**

The evaluation team was charged with making recommendations for ALR's potential third authorization from 2012 to 2015. As RWJF was poised to enter its final push to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic, all its obesity-related programs, included ALR, needed to rapidly focus on the most strategic, “biggest bang for the buck” efforts. Moreover, the timing of consideration in 2011 for ALR reauthorization coincided fortuitously with a major reassessment and redesign of the Foundation's childhood obesity prevention policy and advocacy agenda. Within this broad and compelling context, three themes emerged from the interviews regarding the overall approach that a phase three (ALR-3) should take: (1) coordinate with, and contribute to, achieving the newly refined Foundation childhood obesity policy and advocacy priorities, specifically the third and fourth priority areas: “increase the time, intensity and duration of physical activity during the school day and out-of-school programs” and “increase physical activity by improving the built environment in communities”; (2) place more emphasis on national impact, not just the impact on a small number of communities; and (3) focus clearly on communities and populations most affected by the childhood obesity epidemic.

Recommendations for ALR-3 also needed to address the relative priority among ALR's existing three goals. Key informants gave top priority to an ALR reauthorization emphasizing, or even focusing exclusively on, translation and dissemination of research evidence, bridging from research to practice and policy including prominent

**Table 1.** Application of three-tiered policy typology: examples of Active Living Research impact on policy/practice

Receiver: level of policy/practice	Receiver: decision-making organization	Policy/practice change
<b>Bicycle and pedestrian-related</b>		
State <sup>a</sup>	Transportation Department	Installed bicycle walkway and paths
State	Legislature	Passed Complete Streets legislation
Local	Regional Planning Agency	Expanded “low-stress” network as part of bicycle master plan
Local	County Transportation Commission	Passed Complete Streets resolution
Local	County Planning Department	Implemented traffic calming features to improve trail safety
Local <sup>a</sup>	County Government Association	Provided new monies for nonmotorized and smart-growth improvements
Local	County and City Councils	Passed road construction policy to consider sidewalks and bike lanes
Local	City Planning Department	Implemented revisions to comprehensive zoning codes
Local	City Transportation Department	Rearranged roadways to accommodate bicycling
Local <sup>a</sup>	City Transportation Department	Implemented bicycle projects
Local <sup>a</sup>	City Transportation Department	Installed walk lights at traffic signals
Local	City Zoning Department	Expanded greenways adding in street connectivity rationale
Local	City Agency (1)	Implemented active building design guidelines
Local	City Agency (2)	Implemented active building design guidelines
Local	City Agency	Passed Complete Streets resolution
Local	City Agency	Added Complete Streets language in new development legislation
Local	City Agency	Closed down streets for pedestrians to walk/bike
<b>School-related</b>		
State	Legislature	Passed bill, enumerating 135 minutes of physical activity per week
State	Legislature	Passed bill, requiring teacher training and resource materials in physical activity mandate
State	Legislature	Passed bill, eliminating size requirements for school sites
State	State Agency	Changed licensing regulations; created design guidelines and teacher training for outdoor childcare settings
Local	School District	Increased no. of schools that required specific amount of physical education
Local	School District	Mandated daily in-class physical activity breaks and teacher training
Local	School District	Mandated minimal recess in all middle schools
Local	School District	Expanded school wellness policy to include physical fitness
Local	City Planning Department	Required new developments to adopt Safe Routes to School policies
Local	City Public Health Department	Expanded Safe Routes to School policy
Local	City Agency	Added Safe Routes to School policy

*(continued on next page)*

**Table 1.** Application of three-tiered policy typology: examples of Active Living Research impact on policy/practice (*continued*)

Receiver: level of policy/practice	Receiver: decision-making organization	Policy/practice change
<b>Park and playground-related</b>		
Tribal	Waste Management Office	Changed environmental policies at playgrounds (e.g., recycling)
Local	County Supervisors/Levee Board	Expanded park area from 1.4 to 41 acres
Local	City Recreation Department	Restructured playgrounds and other public areas to promote physical activity
<b>Other</b>		
State	State Agency	Added BMI to state immunization registry

<sup>a</sup>Examples collected from 2006 key informant interviews for the ALR-1 evaluation.<sup>3</sup> All other examples compiled from 2011 key informant interviews and the 2008-2011 ALR Impact Surveys for the ALR-2 evaluation

support for RWJF-led advocacy efforts. Several respondents commented that ALR's future contribution could be realized only if RWJF strengthened its role in supporting (1) a centralized, coordinating infrastructure for RWJF's entire childhood obesity prevention effort, similar to its earlier support of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids; and (2) an active communication component to complement ALR's efforts to translate and disseminate evidence "making policymakers, practitioners, and advocates the main audiences, not researchers" and to assist end-users in distilling this information for use in community interventions and policy advocacy.

Beyond this aim, informants varied as to how strongly they endorsed any further funding to support new research and to nurture the field of investigators. Most informants thought that some support should continue for these two functions, albeit in a more modest, highly targeted, strategic form. Those strongly endorsing further support for research pointed to the need to identify the most cost-effective policies and environmental interventions. Those informants who recommended continued support to strengthen and diversify the field of investigators stressed ALR's unique role in the convening and facilitation of interdisciplinary relationships and team-building functions crucial to maintaining a field capable of designing and implementing the needed research and translation.

## Conclusion

The evaluation team conducted a retrospective, in-depth assessment of ALR's program period 10 years after the initial funding of the program. Although many grants funded in ALR-2 were still underway at the time of the evaluation, ALR's substantial progress in meeting its three goals were clearly demarcated at the time of the ALR-2 evaluation. Success in meeting its first goal—

supporting research on policy and environmental strategies to promote physical activity and to reduce the childhood obesity epidemic—was documented by the sheer number of publications prepared by grantees and NPO leaders. Given the time lag between research and publication, ALR-2 publications are expected to increase substantially in the next few years. Through its annual convening of researchers and practitioners from a diverse number of fields, and its insistence on interdisciplinary teams featuring young investigators and investigators from varied backgrounds, ALR has strengthened and diversified the field (Goal 2), while helping to leverage \$62 million of the \$127 million in additional funding raised by grantees over a 10-year period.<sup>9</sup>

Considerable progress also was noted in its contribution to policy and practice, its third goal. As recommended by the ALR-1 evaluation,<sup>3</sup> ALR-2 improved its outreach to the policy and practitioner community, and in doing so, helped to accelerate ALR research's contribution to policy and practice. Of the 62 examples of policy contribution and/or impact from 2001 to 2011, slightly more than one half of these examples changed policy or practice, mainly at the local level.

In 2012, RWJF reauthorized ALR, and as discussed by Sallis and colleagues in this issue,<sup>2</sup> ALR-3 (2012–2015) seems quite congruent in most respects with the evaluation recommendations. As recommended, the sole goal of the current Program is to translate research into policy and practice on an accelerated timeline. This includes several approaches suggested by the evaluation such as expanding partnerships with advocacy and policymaking organizations and focusing on decision makers as the main audience. Although it is not entirely clear what the intended limits of ALR's role in communicating lessons and evidence are, nor to what extent RWJF will be complementing ALR's work with other efforts, RWJF has

revitalized its efforts to provide a centralized, coordinated infrastructure for its Childhood Obesity Portfolio, and is establishing vigorous communication efforts overseen by leadership from RWJF and an external coordinating center, with advocacy hubs focused on each of its six policy priorities.

Although ALR explicitly did not focus ALR-3 on the other two original goals, it does still support commissioned analyses and research translation grants as a means of providing new information and responding to policy debates and also continues to organize an annual ALR conference, which contributes to maintaining the field of investigators. These two functions could both be seen as modest, highly targeted strategic forms of continuing these goals, as recommended by the evaluation. Other funders, perhaps within the National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR), may need to garner more support to ensure continued policy and environmental research related to active living, to nurture young investigators, and to foster relationships between the research community and federal/state/local decision makers.

Gaps between the current ALR program structure and specific evaluation recommendations seem to mainly exist in five specific areas. First, Sallis and colleagues<sup>2</sup> do not describe the development of a detailed, strategic outreach and engagement plan for expanding partnerships with policy and advocacy organizations. Second, no mention is made of forming an advisory group composed of decision makers, nor third, of linking to existing, ongoing communications resources for practitioners, policymakers, and advocates. Fourth, investigator capacity-building approaches to communicate findings and lessons to decision makers are quite limited, consisting of research translation grants and better integration of practitioners into the ALR Conference. Workshops, webinars, and tools for investigators to enhance their communication skills are not mentioned. Lastly, the Program description does not mention

increased efforts to partner more with national demonstration initiatives and key youth organizations to help accelerate the application of evidence to practice. Perhaps, as the remodeled RWJF infrastructure becomes more established, this infrastructure can help ALR further its reach, and ensure its evidence is in the hands of those audiences poised to take action.

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