



How to Improve Pedestrian Safety in San Francisco

Community Organizing



Traffic Safety Programs

SFDPH Community Health Education Section

http://www.dph.sf.ca.us/traffic_safety/

Community Organizing

Community organizing is a process by which people come together in organizations or groups to act jointly in the interest of their communities or to work towards some common good.^{3,7} Ideally, people involved in community organizing groups learn how to take greater responsibility for the future of their communities, gain mutual respect and achieve growth as individuals.

The central ingredient of all effective community organizing is building power. Community organizing builds power and works for change most often to achieve social justice with and for those who are disadvantaged in society. With respect to pedestrian and traffic safety, community organizing is a method that moves away from focusing solely on changing individuals' attitudes and behaviors when driving or walking to an approach that mobilizes community members to change local environmental factors for the benefit of all. Public health studies in issues like tobacco control show that involvement in such environmental efforts turns out to also be one of the most effective means of changing the individual attitudes and behaviors.

The following steps can help you organize your community to address pedestrian and traffic safety problems in your area:

Identify the Problem ^{3,4}

It's important to start with a clear idea of what the specific pedestrian safety issues are. Do drivers speed at excessive rates? Are there seniors that live in the neighborhood and do not have enough time to cross the street safely? Being able to clearly state the pedestrian safety problems in your community will help you identify some potential solutions.

Build Support ^{3,4}

Securing long-term pedestrian safety improvements takes a lot of work from a lot of people. It's best to build support for proposed improvements. Think of who else might be interested in this issue and partner up with them. Join an existing coalition or start your own.

Be sure to partner with as many different stakeholders as possible that live in or represent the area in which you are working. Individual residents, neighborhood associations, business owners, faith



leaders, school officials, senior groups, youth leaders, advocates for the disabled, and non-profit agencies serving various ethnic groups – they can all play an important role in advocating for safe, walkable streets. Leaflets, flyers, and articles in local neighborhood papers can ensure that your neighbors know about your concerns. But nothing is as effective as talking one-on-one with people.

It's best to make alliances as early as possible with policymakers in charge of decisions regarding pedestrian safety. This also applies to people who were decision-makers in the past because they have the knowledge to guide your efforts. These people can often help point out what are the specific potential solutions or challenges for your street or neighborhood.

Some examples of individuals to build relationships with include the officers with the Traffic Company at the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD), traffic planners and engineers at the Municipal Transportation Agency (MTA), the San Francisco County Transportation Authority, the ADA Coordinator at the Department of Public Works (DPW), the Pedestrian Safety Project at the Department of Public Health (DPH), and your City Supervisor. If you build positive relationships with these people early, they can often facilitate changes to improve pedestrian safety.

Train Participants 3

It's important that the stakeholders involved in improving pedestrian safety understand the factors involved. Training participants on the issues is an essential step.



First, it's helpful to learn about the classification of your street. Engineers classify streets according to five categories: residential, collector, arterial, state highway, and interstate. Each is designed for a specific purpose, amount and type of traffic, and level of access. The MTA has jurisdiction over residential, collector, and arterial streets. The California Department of Transportation has jurisdiction over state highways and interstates. MTA traffic engineers and planners can help identify your street classification.

To get started on pedestrian safety, participants should have a basic understanding of the general issues in their community and how pedestrian safety is related to these issues (e.g., the history of the neighborhood, major stakeholders such as schools, faith-based organizations, businesses, and hospitals). Introductory trainings can be conducted on the history of the neighborhood with a special focus on transportation. For example, when was your neighborhood established? What were the main modes of transportation over time? How did that impact the walking environment? What has happened to the streets and sidewalks since then? For example, in the 1940s-1960s, the City and County of San Francisco decided to widen streets at the expense of sidewalks to accommodate the predicted influx of automobiles. This policy significantly shortened sidewalk space available to pedestrians. Many examples of shortened sidewalks still exist in San Francisco today.

Participants would also benefit greatly by learning about the factors that most frequently contribute to pedestrian injuries. Some of these factors include speeding, driving while impaired, current traffic engineering measures in the neighborhood or lack thereof, and

the needs of individuals such as seniors, children, and disabled people when using existing pedestrian facilities. The Pedestrian Safety Project at the Department of Public Health can assist with this information. This information is also available on the Internet. Some excellent websites are:

- ◆ California Office of Traffic Safety - <http://www.ots.ca.gov/>
- ◆ Local Government Commission - <http://lgc.org>
- ◆ National Center for Bicycling and Walking -
<http://www.bikewalk.org/>
- ◆ Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center -
<http://www.walkinginfo.org/>
- ◆ The Prevention Institute -
<http://www.preventioninstitute.org/injury.html>
- ◆ SF Department of Public Health Traffic Safety Program-
http://www.dph.sf.ca.us/traffic_safety/
- ◆ The Traffic Safety Center at the University of California, Berkeley - <http://www.tsc.berkeley.edu/html/home.html>;
- ◆ Victoria Transport Policy Institute - <http://www.vtpi.org/>

Trainings do not have to exclusively occur in the beginning of your project. Some other trainings that may be useful to participants as the project develops are:

- ◆ Managing Group Dynamics/Facilitation
- ◆ Traffic Calming 101
- ◆ Fundraising and Grantwriting

Do Research 3,4

Your argument for changes will be stronger if you have research to support your case. You don't have to be a scientist or traffic engineer to do this research. You and your community partners can complete a survey or "walkability audit" of your neighborhood. An example of walkability audits can be found at http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/walkability/Walkability_Audit_Tool.pdf. Also, you can create your own survey addressing specific needs of your community. For examples of surveys from local coalitions, contact the DPH Pedestrian and Traffic Safety Project at (415) 581-2400.

An important piece of data to gather is the number of collisions that occurred in your neighborhood. It's best to get data on all traffic collisions as well as those that result in an injury or death to a pedestrian. The California Highway Patrol (CHP) collects and compiles such data statewide, which is called the State-Wide Integrated Traffic Records System (SWITRS). This data is also broken down by county. This data is published annually. At the time of this publication, the latest data available was from 2002. You can access this data at <http://www.chp.ca.gov/html/switrs2002.html>.



Good sources for local collision and pedestrian injury data include your local police station, planners and engineers at the MTA, or the Pedestrian Safety Project at the DPH. Most likely, these agencies are responsible for keeping track of such data. Some of these agencies even plot these collisions and injuries on a map so individuals can easily see where the problem areas are. If the data isn't mapped, you can do it yourself by getting information on when and where the collisions and injuries occurred as well as the severity of the injury. It will be even more helpful if you can also get the age and race of the person injured or killed. Examples of traffic injury data for San Francisco neighborhoods can be found at http://www.dph.sf.ca.us/traffic_safety/traffic-related_injury_data.htm.

Observing pedestrian activity can enable you to identify the frequency of “pedestrian-vehicle conflicts.” These are cases where the pedestrian or vehicle had to take some action to avoid a collision (i.e., slow down or change direction at the last minute). These are sometimes called “near misses.” If possible, document these observations with video so you can view these observations repeatedly.

Other ways to research pedestrian safety issues in your neighborhood are to:

- ◆ Take pictures of the traffic and people crossing the street;
- ◆ Count the number of pedestrians and vehicles at certain times (rush hour, school drop-off/pick-up times, etc);
- ◆ Interview pedestrians on the sidewalk;
- ◆ Tally the number of traffic measures on the street (i.e., signals, crosswalks, stop signs, etc);
- ◆ Ask the police or transportation departments to evaluate



the “effective” speed at which people drive down the street (otherwise known as the 85% percentile);

- ◆ Count the number of seconds it takes to cross the street versus the number of seconds the signal allows for pedestrians to cross; and
- ◆ Research existing laws or policies that can be implemented or enforced in your neighborhood (e.g., school zones, bus stops, or double parking).

Once you’ve gathered and analyzed all this data, write a brief report or fact sheet summarizing your findings. This will make it easier for you and your supporters to work with influential policymakers and the media in order to get solutions.

Take Action and Propose Solutions ^{3,4}

Now that you have done all that work, this is the step in which you will start to see some results. Propose solutions to the appropriate policymakers regarding the identified problems in the research you and your supporters conducted. It is especially helpful to work with the allies that you’ve already made to help get these solutions put into place!

It’s best to propose both short-term and long-term solutions. For example, if speeding on a particular corridor is a problem, ask your local police station to start enforcing the speed limit as a short-term solution. For a long-term solution, ask the Municipal Transportation Agency to change the streets in a way that compels people to drive at the speed limit (i.e., road diet, traffic circles, traffic signal timing, speed humps, etc).

In the beginning, it's best to advocate for or implement solutions that are simple, small, and inexpensive. Success stories at the start will help create momentum for the larger scale projects that take more time and money. Also, be patient when it comes to the implementation of long-term solutions. Changes to the streets and the transportation infrastructure take a long time. That's why it's best to identify short-term solutions as well.

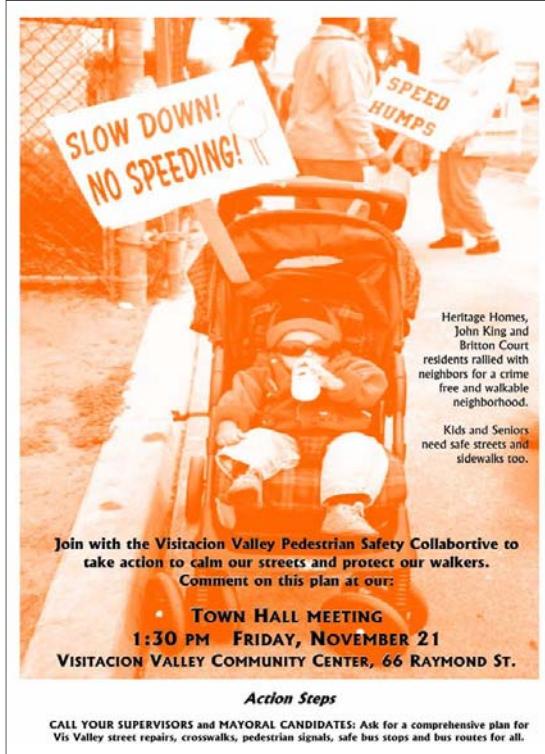
When proposing solutions, there are 3 main criteria you want to fulfill. First, be sure the proposed solution is **achievable**. Second, strive for the **long-term, sustainable** solutions. Short-term solutions are necessary but should not be the only ones completed. In the previously mentioned example, it's good to have the police enforce speeding but after the police stop enforcement, drivers' speeding behavior will return. Ultimately, it's safer in the long-run when the streets are designed so that drivers will naturally drive at the speed limit.

Third, make sure your proposed changes **improve the well-being of all**. Consider the impact of changes on other neighborhoods or people who use the road, such as bicyclists, emergency vehicles, and people who have to use a wheelchair or walker. If you try to improve pedestrian safety in your neighborhood at the expense of others, you will encounter more opposition. Problems will tend to be passed back and forth, not solved.

If you are proposing changes to the streets, think tactically about timing. Often, it's best to ask for traffic engineering changes when street design or work is already planned for that particular street. Examples of street work are street resurfacing, new construction, utility work (such as undergrounding), or sidewalk repair. Find out the schedule of proposed work and ask for the solutions you want as early as you can in the process. A good place to start your investigation of upcoming roadway work is at DPW's Street Construction Coordination Center - <http://209.77.149.9/sfdpw/sccc/sccc.asp>.

Build More Support and Get Attention ^{3,4}

Occasionally, there may be obstacles in getting your proposed solutions put into place. If this is the case, rally your supporters or coalition members and start talking to people with the power to implement what you want. An excellent first step is to talk to your Supervisor. Also, write letters to the directors of the city or state agencies responsible for the proposed changes. Hold a rally or other media event on the intersection that is most dangerous to pedestrians. Write a letter to the editor to the Chronicle, the Examiner, or your local neighborhood paper presenting the research



you've done and why it's important to get the changes you want. The more attention you and your supporters receive, the easier it will be to get the changes needed to make your neighborhood safe for pedestrians (see *Media Advocacy* under *Media/Educational Campaigns*).

Be sure to record all your advocacy efforts. Make copies of all letters, save all

newspaper articles, and tape all TV news stories. If you have conversations with people, write a follow-up letter to that individual, thanking them for their time and summarizing the conversation. Not only does this help build relationships, but the letters serve as a record of the conversation. Date all documents and keep them in an organized file. This is very useful when you need to refer to them several years into the future. Also, you may want to consider sending copies of documentation to your Supervisor so they have evidence of your efforts.

Celebrate Your Success ³

If you and your group succeed in getting the changes you want, throw a party and celebrate all the hard work you've done! You deserve it! Invite your supporters, the people that helped get those changes in place (i.e., your traffic engineer or police officer) and local community members. It's important to recognize the great achievement you've won for your community.

Don't forget to write thank-you letters to the people that implemented those solutions! This will facilitate working with these people in the future if you need to work with them again. Everyone likes to be praised.

Maintain Your Momentum 3,4

You want to ensure that the solutions you worked so hard to achieve are maintained. If the solutions included a policy or change in organizational practices, make certain that it is implemented, enforced and maintained. Often, this involves building on previous work. Ask your coalition members to follow-up with key policymakers to find out how your solutions are being maintained or enforced. Do this on a repeated basis as necessary. Also, include maintenance and/or enforcement as part of your evaluation.

Evaluate Your Hard Work 3,4

It's essential to evaluate your work and see if your efforts helped improve pedestrian safety. The evaluation results will serve several functions. At the very least, it will help:

- 1) Demonstrate whether your neighborhood is truly safer for pedestrians;
- 2) Plan for any additional efforts to further improve pedestrian safety;
- 3) Build additional momentum for future efforts;
- 4) Obtain funding; and
- 5) Organize others do similar work in their communities.

Do the same research you did before the solutions were implemented and compare the pre- and post-results. Research organizations such as universities may be able to assist with the evaluation. Share results with your supporters, policymakers, community-based organizations, and the media.

As you organize your community, please keep in mind the following:

- **Be patient.** Organizing people can be a complicated process. And changing the environment to improve pedestrian safety in the long-term can take awhile.
- **Keep an open mind.** Don't assume there is one right way to do things. And don't get defensive if you are confronted with different ideas and solutions. By nature, community organizing means listening to different people with distinct ideas. You may be surprised at how creative and successful these ideas can be.

Case Study

The San Jose/Guerrero Coalition to Save our Streets¹



Gillian Gillett and Jeff Goldberg wanted to be able to take their young daughter out for walks. But they found that taking a walk with her in the stroller was a dangerous undertaking in their neighborhood. They live on Guerrero Street, at the time a six-lane arterial street that drivers treated as an extension of I-280. Because of their difficulties, they contacted staff from City agencies to try to make Guerrero Street and San Jose Avenue safer

to cross. Shortly thereafter, a neighbor was stabbed to death at approximately 6am. The police officers told Gillian that most likely, the noise and speed of the traffic made neighbors “sitting ducks” for crime. As a result, no one heard the neighbor’s cries for help. That’s when Gillian and Jeff decided to take action.

Gillian and Jeff discovered that there was an existing coalition in their neighborhood called the *San Jose Avenue Coalition to Save our Streets*. They decided to join after the Coalition agreed to include Guerrero Street as part of their target area. Gillian and Jeff also asked their neighbors to join the Coalition. With the power of this larger group, the Coalition developed relationships with key stakeholders and invited them to join as well.

Soon, their coalition included Fair Oaks Neighbors, Northwest Bernal Alliance, Senior Action Network, SF Bicycle Coalition, SF Clean City Coalition, Southwest Mission Neighborhood Association, Transportation for a Livable City, and Walk San Francisco. Local elementary schools, local businesses and St. Luke’s Hospital also joined the Coalition because they recognized the need for schoolchildren, parents, caregivers, patrons and patients to walk to their locations safely. Soon, Coalition members found there was strength in numbers and policymakers were starting to pay attention to them.

The Coalition made key alliances with staff from City agencies in its efforts to calm traffic on Guerrero Street and San Jose Avenue. The Coalition contacted Supervisors Bevan Dufty and Tom Ammiano and secured their support for the San Jose/Guerrero Coalition's goals. They talked to the traffic planners and engineers at the Livable Streets Program at the SF Department of Parking and Traffic (now part of the Municipal Transportation Agency). Also, they contacted staff at the SF Department of Public Works to learn about adding street trees and plantings as well as improving sidewalk conditions and access for some of their disabled neighbors. These alliances proved invaluable as the coalition's work evolved.

Gillian researched the history of her neighborhood and learned that both San Jose Avenue and Guerrero Street were expanded from 4 to 6 lanes in the 1950s to accommodate future automobile traffic. Many of the houses on these streets were literally moved back onto their own back yards, and the sidewalks were severely cut back to incorporate extra lanes for automobiles.

Coalition members also started conducting research on the current traffic conditions in their neighborhood. The police department told them that 105 collisions occurred in their neighborhood between 1997 and 2003. Of those collisions, 101 resulted in injuries, and 11 of those injuries were to pedestrians and bicyclists. At their request, SFPD and DPT measured the speed of traffic and found that 15% of traffic moves faster than 35 mph (the speed limit on Guerrero is 25mph)! Over time, DPT and Caltrans also gave them traffic counts of their local streets. As a result, the



Coalition found that approximately 31,000 cars travel through the center of their neighborhood every day.

Because of the number of children, seniors, and disabled people that live in the neighborhood, they also wanted to know how much time was allotted for crossing Guerrero Street and San Jose Avenue. They found out that the amount of time provided to cross these arterial streets was 33 seconds – approximately 2.5 seconds per foot. This timing was too little for seniors, children, and the disabled to cross safely. They compiled enough research to show decision-makers that conditions for pedestrians were very dangerous in their neighborhood.

They also talked to their neighbors and found out that 5 houses on Guerrero Street just south of Cesar Chavez Street were hit by speeding drivers - 4 of them more than once! Worse still, a man was killed *inside* his house when a car rammed into it. These personal stories provided compelling testimony as to why the conditions on Guerrero Street and San Jose Avenue needed to change.

Jeff and Gillian built a website to act as a resource for the community. On it, they published the Coalition's historical research, traffic laws, events, plans and proposals. They also promoted the website as a way to organize the community and provide a consistent communications tool.

To get a simple, small success for their Coalition, it partnered with the DPH Pedestrian Safety Project on a street banner project. DPH developed street banners with a picture of three children and the





slogan, "We live here! Please slow down" in English and Spanish. These banners were placed on Cesar Chavez Street from Guerrero to Bryant Streets. Gillian and Jeff raised enough money from their neighbors, local schools, and St. Luke's Hospital to purchase additional banners to be placed along Guerrero Street and San Jose Avenue.

After the banners were up, the Coalition held a demonstration at the intersection of Cesar Chavez and Guerrero Streets to protest the speed of traffic and unsafe pedestrian conditions. Over 100 people came to the demonstration, including neighbors, Supervisors Dufty and Ammiano, representatives from key stakeholder organizations, and staff from City agencies. The event was covered by English, Spanish, and Chinese language television news as well as print media.

Because of the Coalition's comprehensive efforts, it asked Supervisors Ammiano and Dufty to introduce legislation to improve pedestrian safety conditions on local streets. In July 2004, Supervisors Dufty and Ammiano introduced legislation to calm traffic on Guerrero Street, San Jose Avenue, and Cesar Chavez Street. This legislation was unanimously approved by the Board of Supervisors on October 22, 2004. Because of this policy and the Coalition's hard work, DPT and DPW:

- ◆ Reduced vehicle traffic from six lanes to four lanes on Guerrero Street and San Jose Avenue south of Cesar Chavez Street;
- ◆ Created bicycle lanes in the place of the eliminated traffic

lanes;

- ◆ Established four-foot wide, crosshatched, painted medians on both sides of the center medians on San Jose Avenue and Guerrero Street;
- ◆ Installed a traffic signal light at the intersection of Duncan and Guerrero Streets;
- ◆ Changed rush-hour tow-away zones into parking; and
- ◆ Reduced two multiple turn lanes – one from 3 to 2 lanes and another from 2 lanes to 1.



These initial improvements have only spurred the Coalition to do more. They secured over \$120,000 in grants to help create a detailed plan to further improve traffic safety and the neighborhood. At the time of this publication, Coalition members and the San Jose/Guerrero neighborhood were halfway through their community planning process.

For more information, visit <http://www.sanjoseguerrero.com>,

email the Coalition at contact@sanjoseguerrero.com, or call (415) 285-8188.



**City & County of San Francisco
Department of Public Health
Community Health Programs**

Find out more about our injury data, community-based projects, media campaigns, and general information at:
http://www.dph.sf.ca.us/traffic_safety/

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