



# San Antonio Mayor's Fitness Council:

Staying Power Through Local Leadership Changes

The San Antonio Mayor's Fitness Council (MFC) was launched in 2010 under former Mayor Julián Castro with financial support from the Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) grant awarded to San Antonio by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The MFC's mission is to lead San Antonio to be one of the healthiest and most active communities in the nation and one in which residents, groups and organizations work collaboratively to achieve targeted health and fitness goals. When Castro left his role as mayor mid-term four years later to become the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Council faced a first test to its perceived value and sustainability. Without its creator and key advocate, would it survive a change in city leadership? As it turns out, it did. Mayor Taylor, City Council members and City leadership have continued to passionately support the work of the MFC.

How did the MFC get to this point in a relatively short period of time? According to Skelton, its efforts to create a collaborative infrastructure and to support initiatives that impact the entire city (vs. just particular neighborhoods or population segments) have been instrumental. Examples include biennial Siclovia events where major city streets are closed for a day giving residents safe places to exercise and play; Fitness in the Park, a wide variety of free fitness classes (including strength training, kickboxing, Aqua Zumba, belly dancing, tai chi and community walking, to name a few) hosted in parks through-

out the city – over 100 per week to choose from; a student ambassador program where youth motivate their peer to make healthy behavior changes like drinking more water; a Healthy Workplace recognition program that provides a framework and resources for employers to support employee wellness; FitPass, a city-wide and interactive fitness “scavenger hunt” where participants receive points for participating in a variety of fitness, wellness and nutrition-focused activities and are eligible to win prizes for completing their FitPass passports; ¡Por Vida!, a healthy menu initiative that recognizes menu items that meet certain nutritional criteria; and the FitCitySA.com web site which was created to be the single “go to” portal for all health, wellness and nutrition events and resources in the city. While the MFC has taken stances on local policy issues such as physical education and nutrition in schools, it has also steered clear of issues that could create opposition or be a distraction from its core work.

Another key factor in the MFC's success has been that members collaborate and partner to support the work of each other's initiatives to increase the collective impact. In just one example, the Parks and Recreation Department staff will exhibit and promote their Fit Pass program at San Antonio Sport's Fit Family Challenge events; the Fit Family Challenge is promoted as a featured event for points by Fit Pass; and both Fit Pass and Fit Family Challenge will lead participants to finding one of the more than 5,000 free Fitness in the Park

classes offered each year by the City of San Antonio. These partnerships increase the impact and build connections for residents to find more fitness opportunities and help the community as a whole.

In addition, while the mission of the MFC has not changed, leaders have institutionalized a biennial moderated strategic planning process. The focus of the process is to maximize impact by reviewing the work in progress, clarifying future priorities and discovering barriers that limit their effectiveness. One internal barrier identified at the most recent retreat was a need to restructure roles and committees to improve communication. Once a plan for the next cycle has been approved, committees are tasked with identifying and developing three to five tactical initiatives that will help impact goal metrics.

Speaking of **metrics**, the MFC and its partners do their best to track participation in supported events including Siclovía (from 15,000 at the first to 75,000 attending most recently), Fitness in the Park classes, FitPass challenges, and in the Healthy Workplace program (36 workplaces currently recognized). The long-term goal, however, is to have sustained impact and improve the health of the community by reducing rates of diabetes and obesity in San Antonio. For this, data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) is used to track change over time. And, while year-to-year rates may be difficult indicators to follow as they can jump around (due to small sample size), success may be best measured with what happens over 5 to 10 year spans. Current trends indicate a flattening out of rates of increase in obesity. According to Skelton, however, the bigger impact is not seen in the numbers. **“Ten years ago, you didn’t see people in parks, on the trails or out running like we do today. Now as you get out on the weekend you’ll see a tremendous amount of people out being active and taking advantage of all the resources available to them.”**

All of these opportunities to be active also lead to people seeing others being active, which builds on the culture that San Antonio is a healthy city and creates momentum for engaging in healthy behaviors. “Everyone wants to go to the party that others are going to,” says Skelton. “San Antonio is moving toward being a really healthy city; and our residents are embracing it.”

## Advice for Those Working on Similar Initiatives:

- » Engage local leadership and get their support from the beginning.
- » When selecting leadership, balance position with passion. At times the title is important, but more frequently, it’s passion for the issue that will keep someone engaged and giving of their free time.
- » Build shared understanding around how to create change. (As part of the CPPW initiative The City of San Antonio Metro Health Department brought in the Heath brothers’ group – authors of *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* – to do a workshop at the outset).
- » Focus on initiatives the impact the entire community.