

AARP New Jersey

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NEW JERSEY

Small Grants, Quick Impact

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Residents of Bloomfield enjoy a walk in Brookdale Park, where new time clocks track their strolls. Photo by Jackie Molloy.

By Christina Hernandez Sherwood

Physical activity can reduce the risk of chronic disease, so one town—with the help of a grant from AARP—is offering residents a challenge: Take more walks.

With a \$10,000 AARP Community Challenge grant, the township of Bloomfield, partnering with the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition, has expanded its walking program by purchasing and installing time clocks that track participants' strolls.

“AARP saw that this is what our community needs—an environmental, sustainable program that will reduce chronic disease in the long run,” explained Maya Lordo, the township’s assistant health officer.

Bloomfield’s grant was one of 129 awarded last year to municipalities and organizations in every state as part of the second annual AARP Community Challenge. There were more than 1,600 applications.

The program funds modest projects that typically last no more than six months, with immediate impact, making communities more livable, said Christine Newman, AARP New Jersey community outreach manager.

“We want to make sure New Jersey is a great place for people to live at any age,” Newman said. “Whether you’re a millennial, a mom with kids or someone in retirement, we all want the same things out of our communities.”

Participants in Bloomfield’s free walking program receive a key fob they can use to check in at the start of each walk.

A half-dozen “JobClocks” (named for their original use as employee time clocks) are installed throughout areas only accessible by walking, such as parks and greenway paths.

“We’re so isolated sometimes because of our schedules, because of technology,” Lordo said. “Maybe we can use technology to engage in human connection and physical activity.”

A hub for socializing

In the borough of Bound Brook, last year’s other New Jersey grant winner also created a project meant to draw residents together—and into the outdoors.

An \$8,700 award helped cover the cost of building and installing a new “parklet,” a small mobile gathering place in downtown that has been transported to farmers markets and 4-H events.

“The hope was that people would come and sit at the parklet and just start to socialize with one another,” said Maria Strada, executive director of the nonprofit Middle Earth, which works with at-risk youth in Somerset County. “We saw that happen.”

The project was a partnership among Middle Earth, Somerset County 4-H and the grant recipient, Healthier Somerset, a coalition to improve the well-being of county residents.

The project mobilized about a dozen high school students, who, in addition to designing and building the parklet, worked with council members and police for the necessary permits to park it downtown.

Strada said the students were surprised to learn AARP funded their project. But she explained to them the importance of involving young people in addressing the needs of the older population.

“That opened up a different kind of dialogue with them,” Strada said. “That’s the beauty of it. You get to talk about it.”

Localities and groups can apply for the 2019 AARP Community Challenge grants starting this month at aarp.org/livable.

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