



Addressing the Needs of Low-Income Communities through the Federal Safe Routes to School Program

Best Practices from and for State SRTS Programs

*Prepared by the Safe Routes to School National Partnership
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Background

Applying for a federally-funded Safe Routes to School (SRTS) award through a State Department of Transportation (DOT) can be a time-consuming endeavor requiring expertise and assistance from local planners and engineers, as well as coordination with the school district and city. Once a project is awarded funding, local award recipients must comply with federal highway regulations, which can require additional expertise and staffing to complete paperwork and submit for approvals. Additionally, the program is operated on a reimbursement basis, meaning that schools and localities must expend the funds and then wait for reimbursement.

These aspects of the Safe Routes to School program can create challenges for low-income communities in a number of ways. Schools in low-income areas are often understaffed, meaning that their availability to spearhead a Safe Routes to School award may be limited. These schools also face significant challenges in absorbing the costs of carrying out a Safe Routes to School project while waiting for reimbursement. Finally, these communities may lack access to city or county engineering staff with the expertise necessary to implement the project and comply with federal and state regulatory processes. Yet, these schools and communities are often the very institutions where significant numbers of children are already walking to school in areas with dangerous traffic conditions and other threats to personal safety. These schools may also lack the resources to bus children and the parents may be unable to drive, walk or bicycle their children to school.

Common Approaches for Low-Income Communities

Several states have paid attention to these concerns, and are utilizing different approaches to address the special needs and challenges of low-income communities, either in the application process or the implementation phase. As the federal Safe Routes to School program is still relatively new, many state Departments of Transportation have chosen different mechanisms or initiatives for low-income communities. The Safe Routes to School National Partnership surveyed state SRTS coordinators (the federal legislation requires that a full time Coordinator work in each state) to identify best practices for serving low-income communities through the SRTS application and project delivery process. Several types of approaches were identified:

- 1. Develop a comprehensive initiative specifically for low-income communities.** Some states have chosen to develop and fund a special SRTS program to ensure that SRTS infrastructure improvements and programs are implemented in low-income communities, and to learn more about what types of assistance would be most valuable to these communities in future application cycles.

2. **Carry out a special outreach or awareness campaign.** Given the staffing shortages many low-income schools experience, it can require an extra effort to ensure that low-income communities are aware of SRTS awards and consider applying. Some states have carried out special outreach efforts to reach low-income communities.
3. **Provide funding for planning awards.** Another approach that some states use is to provide small planning awards with much-simplified applications. These awards provide funding to help smaller and low-income communities do the initial assessments and develop plans that are necessary for applying for a larger-scale award.
4. **Award extra points on applications.** Some states have chosen to ensure adequate representation of low-income communities by providing extra points or consideration during the application review process if a community or school meets a certain income level criteria or has a minimum percentage of children receiving free or reduced school lunches.
5. **Offer engineering assistance.** Low-income communities can be deterred from applying or can lag in completing a project due to a shortage of engineers or planners. Several states have contracted with statewide planning or engineering firms that provide expertise to low-income communities at the state's expense, or with costs built in to the award amount, to help them develop plans and carry out SRTS projects.

Best Practices in Action

Given the varying circumstances within states, the state Departments of Transportation have different approaches for engaging low-income communities in SRTS. Some states may utilize just one of the best practices identified above, while others may offer a package of initiatives. Some examples from state SRTS programs follow. Contact information is provided for each state's SRTS coordinator for additional information.

- Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) offers the Planning Assistance Program (PAP) for recipients in need of additional assistance for Safe Routes to School. Applicants, which are primarily low-income communities, are evaluated based on their need for a Safe Routes to School program and their lack of resources to pursue an award. If selected, the community is paired with a consultant (paid for by the state) who works with the community to do a needs assessment including community input, make recommendations for needed improvements, and to help the community write an application for the next funding cycle. PAP recipients also receive extra points on their subsequent SRTS application. Six communities have been selected for PAP support, including the Yavapai-Apache Nation in Camp Verde and the City of Cottonwood.
Contact: Brian Fellows, (602) 712-8010, bfellows@azdot.gov
- Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) administers all SRTS projects and activities at the state level. DelDOT uses consultants to provide planning and design assistance to all communities that request it, as well as to create construction documents and perform the construction. DelDOT also orders all materials and services needed for non-infrastructure programs. This means that SRTS recipients do not have to absorb any costs while awaiting reimbursement, and do not have to deal with procurement or regulatory compliance issues. Each recipient simply signs an agreement with DelDOT that gives the state permission to do the work and outlines the recipient's

responsibilities to use the materials and services only for SRTS purposes, to maintain the infrastructure improvements, and to participate in statewide program evaluation. The state also provides statewide SRTS training opportunities, supplies, and incentive materials. Forty percent of Delaware's SRTS award recipients have at least 50% low-income students, demonstrating the success of their approach.

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- Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) awarded funds to a non-profit organization, the Active Transportation Alliance, to work directly with 10 low-income communities in the state. The Active Transportation Alliance is helping the communities identify needed infrastructure improvements and programs, develop School Travel Plans, and prepare applications for the next funding cycle.
Contact: Megan Holt, (217)-785-2932, saferoutes@dot.il.gov
- Iowa Department of Transportation (Iowa DOT) offers engineering assistance at no cost to small communities that are experiencing traffic problems around the school but do not know how to resolve the problem through a program called TEAP-SRTS. It is modeled after an existing program called the Traffic Engineering Assistance Program (TEAP) that helps smaller communities address traffic problems. Through the TEAP-SRTS program, communities receive up to \$10,000 to underwrite assistance from an on-call engineering firm under state contract. The firm evaluates the problem area at the school, suggests solutions, and assists the community in applying for SRTS funding. In addition to this support, Iowa DOT offers free SRTS workshops, provided by the Iowa Bicycle Coalition under a statewide contract, to communities of any size.
Contact: Kathy Ridnour, (515) 239-1713, Kathy.Ridnour@dot.iowa.gov
- Maryland Highway Safety Office (MHSO) has entered into an open-ended contract with an engineering consulting firm. The firm is available to any community that does not have access to engineering resources within their jurisdiction. The firm provides preliminary planning and design services, assists the award recipient in obtaining permits, and helps the recipient navigate the federal and state regulatory requirements and approval processes. MHSO has set aside a portion of the state's SRTS funds to cover the contract with the engineering firm.
Contact: Joseph Pelaia, (410) 787-7620, jpelaia@sha.state.md.us
- Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) SRTS program provides support to schools for a planning process in which the school determines the barriers in attitudes and the environment to kids walking and bicycling to school. The collaborative process ends with a school-specific plan to encourage and enable walking and bicycling that schools may use to apply for federal SRTS funds to implement a portion of their plan. Realizing that developing these plans would prove challenging to schools in low-income communities, MDOT proactively facilitated SRTS activities in the eight poorest urban communities in the state. MDOT built on relationships developed through Governor Granholm's *Cities of Promise Initiative*, an existing inter-departmental collaboration with state agencies, nonprofits, and community advocates to focus resources on those communities. Americorps staff, under the direction of the Michigan State Housing Development Agency's Urban Revitalization Division, played lead roles with schools in each of those cities. For schools in these eight communities, MDOT performs all of the SRTS project administration—including hiring the contractors to do planning and

design, carry out construction, and comply with federal and state regulations. This ensures that these communities are able to participate, even when they lack the staff to handle the administrative burden of the award or are unable to pursue funding available on a reimbursement basis.

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- New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) offers up to 20 bonus points on a 100-point scoring scale for applications from disadvantaged communities. NHDOT also offers two categories of awards that are particularly useful to low-income communities: start-up awards with a simple application form and funds to support development of comprehensive travel plans. Communities in the rural northern part of the state that often experience challenging economic circumstances have been well-represented in the state's SRTS program.

Contact: John Corrigan, (603) 271-1980, JCorrigan@dot.state.nh.us

- New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) is carrying out an Urban Demonstration Project in six schools in Newark, Trenton, and Camden. The project seeks to identify the barriers that urban communities face in applying for and successfully carrying out federally-funded Safe Routes to School programs, and to assist the schools in overcoming them. At all six schools, NJDOT opened a dialogue with students and school officials, worked to engage neighborhood partners, held community workshops, and developed needs assessments and travel plans. NJDOT is currently finalizing the package of infrastructure improvements for each school, based on community input. In conversations with community members, NJDOT identified the need to focus on violence within the neighborhood and blighted buildings—in addition to more traditional concerns about traffic safety and “stranger-danger”—to make it safer for children to walk and bicycle. The experiences of these six schools will inform NJDOT's efforts to ensure that the Safe Routes to School program benefits schools in all types of communities.

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- New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT) does a lot of outreach through the Regional Planning Organizations (RPOs) in New Mexico, as they work closely with smaller, more rural, and lower-income communities. The RPO planners promote SRTS in their regions. In addition, some provide technical assistance to help communities develop SRTS Action Plans or serve on local SRTS teams. NMDOT also factors in community resources and size when reviewing applications to ensure that communities with fewer resources and staff are not disadvantaged. Since most New Mexico communities fall into the low-income category, NMDOT offers \$15,000 awards for communities that want to develop SRTS Action Plans. The state also provides engineering assistance to all funded communities, as most do not have access to engineering staff.

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- Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) requires all communities to develop School Travel Plans. ODOT provides communities with access to an engineering firm that is under a “Task Order” contract with the state. Communities receive up to \$1,000 per school for items needed during the planning process, such as advertising, plus they receive engineering support paid for by the state. This significantly reduces the burden

for schools and communities that may not be familiar with the federal funding process, and helps ensure high-quality School Travel Plans.

Contact: Julie Walcoff, (614) 466-3049, Julie.walcoff@dot.state.oh.us

- South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) offers extra points during the application review process for Title I schools. All schools and communities that receive funding have access to planning workshops and technical assistance from SCDOT to help them implement a successful program. In addition, SCDOT provides free incentives and educational information to schools that participate in Walk to School Day.

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- Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) provides extra points on the funding application to schools in low-income communities. Staff at the state Department of Education also personally contacted schools in low-income areas to encourage them to apply for funding. Workshops explaining the application process are offered throughout the state through Interactive Television. VTrans also has engineering firms on retainer. Funded communities have the option of using their own staff or consultants or to use one of the VTrans engineering firms. Generally, larger communities hired their own consultants while smaller communities used one of the state's consultants.

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Conclusion

Low-income communities and schools often experience limited local financial resources and agency staff support, built environment and traffic safety barriers, high crime rates, high levels of childhood obesity, and low community involvement. Coupled with federal regulatory and reimbursement burdens, these factors can make it difficult for low-income schools to participate in the state Safe Routes to School program. Targeted awareness campaigns, direct financial support, staffing, training and technical assistance, can all increase the ability of a low-income school to compete for state funds and successfully launch a Safe Routes to School program.

As Safe Routes to School is a relatively new federal program, the state approaches featured above merit examination for potential replication in other states. If every state Department of Transportation is able to ensure participation from communities of all income levels, children throughout every state will be better able to safely walk and bicycle to and from school.