

Rural Active Living Assessment (RALA) Tools Briefing Sheet for Healthy Maine Partnerships

As a Healthy Maine Partnership, you are being asked to use the RALA Tools to assess your community's physical, programmatic and policy environments as they relate to opportunities for physical activity. This Briefing Sheet is meant to help you get started.

The RALA Tools were designed by researchers at the University of Southern Maine (USM) to help you collect data on physical environment features and amenities, town characteristics, community programs, and policies that could potentially influence levels of physical activity among residents in rural communities with a population of 10,000 or fewer. Included is a detailed tool to look at specific "segments" of your community and assess key characteristics of those segments. The RALA assessment also provides a structure for assessing the programs and policies that might help to overcome barriers to physical activity.

The RALA Tools consist of three separate assessments, including: 1. The Town-wide Assessment, 2. The Program and Policy Assessment, and 3. The Street Segment Assessment. These three assessment instruments are designed to be used together to conduct a comprehensive active living audit of your rural town. Please keep in mind that some rural communities have found it necessary to adapt and modify the RALA tools to better suit their needs or unique characteristics (for example, the RALA Tools were originally designed with youth and childhood obesity prevention in mind. If you are more interested in physical activity opportunities for seniors, you may add or change questions to reflect the population you wish to serve). Since conducting these assessments is for your community's benefit, we encourage you to adapt as necessary.

The RALA Tools were designed to be as user-friendly as possible. They were tested by community members in rural communities throughout the US, whose feedback helped researchers to simplify and refine the tools while maintaining their effectiveness and reliability.

With that said, it is important to note that using the RALA Tools requires some up-front preparation in order to be used effectively. This includes scanning maps of your community to better understand its layout and boundaries, choosing the "Town Central Point" (which is necessary to conduct the Town-wide Assessment and the Street Segment Assessment), and selecting which segments you are going to audit. The RALA Codebook provides details on how to conduct these steps.

Please also note that if you plan to enlist the help and knowledge of local town officials to assist with any part of the RALA Tools, it is important to provide them with some background information about what the RALA Tools are being used for, what your goals are for using them and how they should go about providing the information you wish to collect. You will need to tell them what you are using as your "Town Central Point" if they are helping you with the Town-wide Assessment. It may help to provide them with a copy of the RALA Codebook. (The three tools and the codebook are all available here: <http://www.activelivingresearch.org/node/11947>)

At the end of the Codebook, you'll find scoring tools for the Town-wide Assessment and the Program and Policy Assessment. These scoring tools are meant to further help users identify areas for improvement or change in your community, and can be used to help create a dialogue among community members, leaders and researchers as they strive to make their towns more activity friendly. Currently there is no scoring tool for the Street Segment Assessment.

In January 2013, researchers at USM will be offering a webinar for HMP members that wish to receive more guidance on using the RALA Tools. This tutorial will help familiarize RALA users with the tools and will allow the opportunity for specific questions about how to use the RALA Tools in your rural community. In the meantime, many details about the RALA Tools are explained step-by-step in the Codebook should any questions arise.

The RALA Tools were designed by researchers at the Maine Rural Health Research Center, University of Southern Maine, and were tested and refined by researchers at the University of Southern Maine, Tufts University, University of Alabama, and University of Mississippi. For questions about the RALA tools, please contact Dr. David Hartley at davidh@usm.maine.edu.