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Prioritizing Equity in Multimodal Trail and Pathway Grant Programs

Trails and multimodal paths are an important part of a state's active transportation network because they can provide off-road connections between destinations. Several states have found ways to use their trail and multimodal path programs to achieve defined state priorities, such as advancing equitable active transportation access. This factsheet focuses on how 10 states have incorporated equity and need into their multimodal trail and pathway grant programs. Use this factsheet to see how states currently define high-need communities and then prioritize and support them within grant programs.



What is a multimodal path for transportation, and what are state multimodal trail programs?

Multimodal trails are off-road routes that can be used for walking and biking. Depending on the state, these facilities can be funded and administered by transportation departments or natural resource departments. Transportation departments will typically work on trails only when there is a demonstrated transportation benefit while natural resource departments focus on trails more broadly, including trails purely for recreation. Federal and state transportation funding can support multimodal trails if there is a transportation connection. Some states have state-funded trail programs and they vary from purely recreational trails to programs focused specifically on connecting people from their homes to recreational spaces.

This factsheet focuses on grant programs that build connections for walking and biking between destinations rather than purely for recreational purposes. However, just because a path is fun or has recreational potential, doesn't mean it can't serve as a transportation connection.

This factsheet outlines ways that states advance equity goals through their multimodal trail programs: typically by defining high-need communities and then prioritizing them in project selection and funding. Let's take a closer look at what that means in practice.

How to Define High-Need Communities

In order to prioritize communities where people rely on walking and bicycling for transportation and places that have not benefitted from investments in connected transportation networks, state agencies must define who the intended beneficiaries of their programs are. “High-need” can mean a variety of things, so states should clearly define what they mean by this term based on their specific population and context. Selecting specific indicators that are available through the census or other data collection may make the scoring and prioritization process easier. Because trails can fall under transportation and recreation/natural resources, these agencies should look to one another for data and other resources to support their shared goals. If the natural resources department is running this program, consider connecting with transportation to understand current and planned network connectivity and how people will be able to get to the trail amenities. Transportation departments should connect with natural resources agencies to see if they have data on park access and equity.

For more information on how state departments of transportation define and prioritize high-need communities in other funding programs, read [this factsheet](#) focused on the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP).



Some common categories that states include in their definitions of “high-need” include the following:

- **Low Income:** Many states use this category, but it has to be defined clearly to be meaningful. [The Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund](#) uses median household income (MHI) based on the American Community Survey five-year estimates to measure need and splits applicants into bottom, middle, and top thirds as well as the top ~two percent.
- **Race and Ethnicity:** Use demographic data to identify areas with higher proportions of Black, Indigenous, or other people of color. States can break up the categories (i.e. African American, American Indian, Hispanic/Latino) or group them into people of color as Colorado has done in their map of [Disproportionately Impacted Communities](#).
- **Age:** The percentage of older and younger people can be a useful indicator of non-drivers and vulnerable road users. [Ohio](#) prioritizes places with higher concentrations of people under age 18 and people over age 64.
- **Linguistically Isolated or Limited English Proficiency:** In [Massachusetts](#), communities where 25 percent or more of residents have no one over the age of 14 who speaks English only or very well (English Isolation) are considered Environmental Justice Communities and prioritized for projects.

To easily assess many of these indicators, states can use the federal Environmental Protection Agency's [EJ SCREEN](#) mapping tool which uses US Census data.

How to Prioritize High-Need Communities

Once there is a clear definition of what needs the state wants to prioritize, that information can be used to prioritize applications and support applicants. States should clearly state how different application elements affect scoring and what opportunities are available. Many states publish grant guidance that includes a project scoring rubric that shows how many points each question is worth.

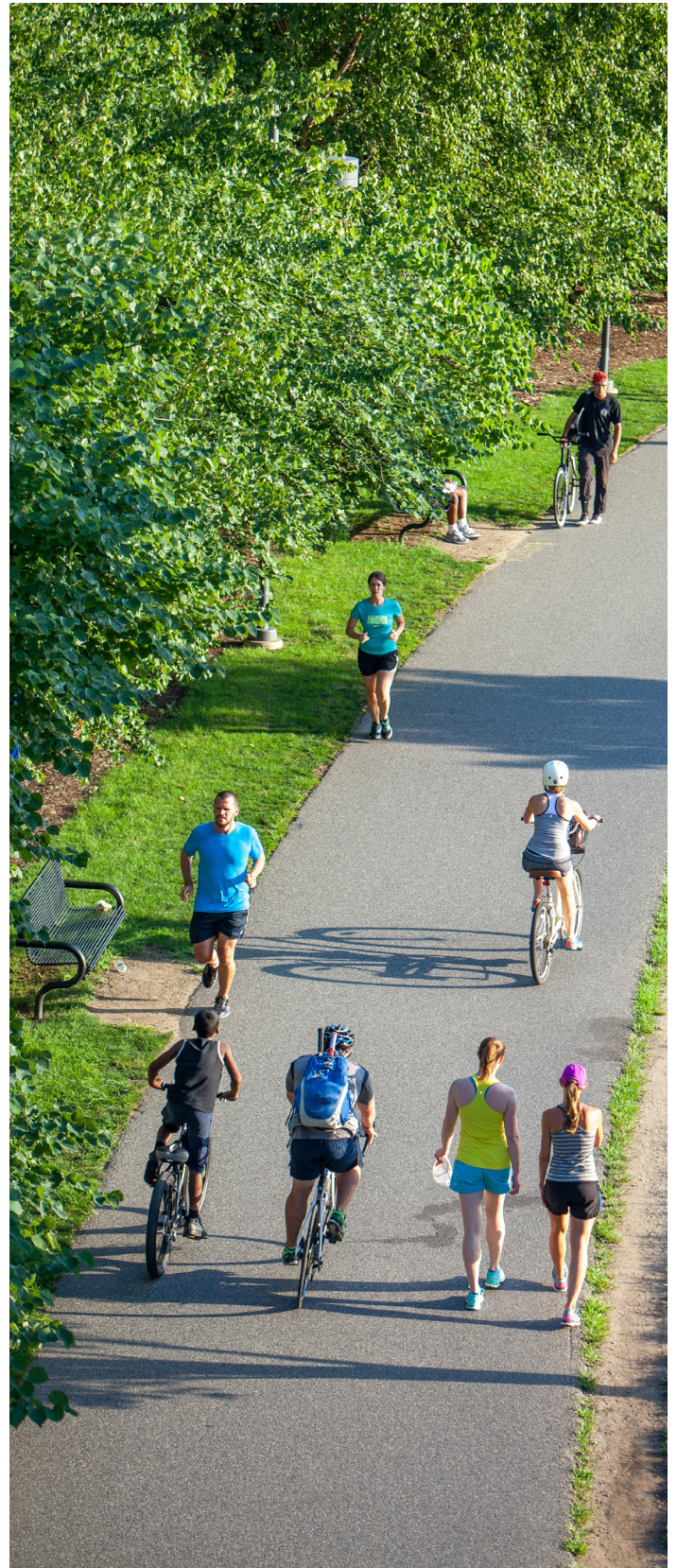
- **Funding Commitment or Set-aside:** In California, the [Active Transportation Program](#) weaves together many sources of funding to increase use of active transportation modes across the state including trails and multiuse paths that serve active transportation purposes. Within this program, disadvantaged communities (DAC) are guaranteed a minimum of 25 percent of the entire program's funding. Similarly, [Massachusetts's Complete Streets Funding Program](#) dedicates at least one-third of program funding to serving communities below the statewide median household income level. This program funds Complete Streets policy and prioritization plan development. Once communities have gone through those planning steps they are eligible for construction funding.



- **Targeted Application Questions:** On the grant application, states can include specific questions to understand what benefits a project may bring to high-need populations and then allocate points to applications that fit the program priorities.
 - › Tennessee's [Multimodal Access Grant program](#) application includes the question, "How will this project aid economic development in the community or serve economically disadvantaged populations?"
 - › Connecticut's [Community Connectivity Program](#) allocates 30 out of 110 points to "Public Benefit Impact" which includes accessibility, equity, safety, and public support. Ten points go to the transportation equity question "Does the proposed project improve transportation access for underserved communities, including but not limited to minority communities, zero-vehicle households, low-income households, Limited-English speaking households, people with disabilities or those under 18 and 65 years of age?"
 - › The New York Department of Environmental Conservation's [Climate Smart Communities Grant Program](#) helps local governments pay for projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change. Past projects have included trail links, Safe Routes to School and bike friendly plan implementation, and sidewalks. The review criteria provide additional points for applications from communities with less than Median Household Income and/or have project sites that are in a potential Environmental Justice area.



- **Indicator Maps:** Many states use an interactive map that overlays their selected indicators to produce a score for projects based on their location. This is useful because it standardizes the information for review and provides the data to communities to easily access and add to their applications.
 - › New Mexico uses a [Composite Equity Map](#) that assigns a score to each census block based on six variables linked to historic underinvestment: age, race, income, educational attainment, limited English proficiency, and access to a vehicle. It was originally developed for a statewide bicycle network plan and is now used to indicate vulnerability on the state's federal Transportation Alternatives and Recreational Trails applications.
 - › Indiana's [Next Level Trails](#) program, which is focused primarily on building out the state's trail network, gives additional consideration to applications where trail projects provide access to a population not currently within a [five-mile radius of a trail](#) and counties considered deficient in [trail miles per capita](#) based on Indiana Trails Inventory and U.S. Census data.
 - › In Ohio, the [Clean Ohio Trail Fund](#) application includes an interactive map using U.S. Census data to make it easy for applicants to access information needed to know whether their project is in a high-need/high-demand area with composite equity scores of three or higher. The equity score was determined by a [needs analysis](#) made up of seven indicators that consider populations meeting the following criteria, minority groups, youth, older adults, poverty, no high school diploma, limited English proficiency, and no access to a motor vehicle. Applications get additional points if the project is both in a defined high-need/high-demand area and creates a new trail or connector trail.



- Adjusted Match Requirements:** The match requirement for grant programs can be a major barrier for smaller, less well-resourced communities.
 - In Michigan, the [Natural Resources Trust Fund](#), which funds trails, asks about the financial need of applicants based on median household income (MHI) based on the American Community Survey 5-year estimates. For financial need, projects in communities with the lowest one-third MHI receive 40 points, the middle one-third MHI receives 20 points, and the upper one-third MHI receives zero points. They use this same information to determine points based on the match that a community can provide. Communities with the bottom one-third of MHI receive more points for providing matching funds.



APPLICANT MATCH*				
Local Match Percentage*	Top ~2% Median Household Income	Top 1/3 rd MHI	Middle 1/3 rd MHI	Bottom 1/3 rd MHI
0-25%	0	0	0	0
26-29%	0	0	10	15
30-39%	0	10	15	25
40-49%	10	15	25	35
50%+	15	25	35	45

* Only match that is documented and secure is used to score this criterion.

- The [Illinois Transportation Enhancement Program](#), which braids federal and state funding, has a sliding scale for their match which is determined by community size, median income, and total property tax base. State funding goes toward pedestrian and bicycle facilities as well as conversion of abandoned railroad corridors to trails.
- Implementation Support:** Even when a project is funded, there is significant work that has to go into managing the funding and implementing the project. Some states help manage projects that are awarded funding.
 - Tennessee offers technical assistance and can manage awarded projects for applicants that are in state-determined [Distressed and At-Risk Counties](#).

Future Steps

Multimodal trail and pathway programs are exciting opportunities to expand the active transportation network and increase the number of people walking and biking. Use these examples as an opportunity to intentionally prioritize need in your state’s multimodal trail and pathway program.