



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **New Ulm Aims to Make It Easier and Safer for More Kids to Walk and Bike to School**

*Funding from the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota  
will help local groups implement weeklong demonstration project*

NEW ULM, Minn. (May 19, 2015) — Look around Jefferson Elementary School in New Ulm and the public junior and senior high at the beginning and end of the school day and you'll obviously see a lot of kids. Yet you won't likely see a lot of them walking or biking to get to or from school. Starting this fall, several groups in New Ulm are hoping to change that with the help of an "Active Places" demonstration project award from the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross).

The funding was awarded to The Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation<sup>®</sup>, which is the parent organization for Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project<sup>®</sup> (HONU). With this funding, HONU is leading an effort to revitalize the school arrival and departure process in the area to help improve safety and create an environment that encourages more kids to walk and bike to school. Partners include New Ulm Public Schools; the City of New Ulm; New Ulm's Coalition for Active, Safe and Healthy Streets (CASHS); New Ulm Medical Center's Community Engagement Council; the New Ulm Bike Group and the Region Nine Development Commission.

The groups are planning a weeklong demonstration project to be held during the first week of school in August that will introduce parents and residents in the area to various "traffic calming" measures. These measures will include temporary bumpouts at key intersections along South Payne Street; and delineated arrival and departure zones, which separate different modes of travel and improve safety for walkers and bikers. Parent and community volunteers, the police department and school crossing guards will all be involved.

The demonstration project planned for Jefferson and the junior/senior high is part of a broader Safe Routes to School (SRTS) planning initiative that started in July 2014 when the Region Nine Development Commission received a federal technical assistance grant from the Minnesota Department of Transportation. The SRTS initiative involves all of the schools in New Ulm and a community action team continues to work on options for all sites.

HONU manager Cindy Winters said, "Walking or biking to school provides children with the opportunity to be physically active, which gives them more energy and helps them stay more focused in the classroom so they learn better. We're hoping when parents feel the area around the school is safer with the temporary measures, they will be more likely to encourage their children to walk or bike to school. We also hope that residents will also be more excited to walk and bike in the area as well."

Jeff Bertrang, superintendent for New Ulm Public Schools and a CASHS member, said, "Getting more children to walk and bike to school has been one of my primary initiatives since I took over as superintendent in the fall of 2013. We're working to engage parents in the design process to help garner support for the new process as well as help them understand the purpose of various traffic calming measures."

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## **School Arrival and Departure Demonstration Project – Page Two**

According to Winters, a HONU-commissioned report prepared for New Ulm in the fall of 2013 by the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute identified improving the school arrival and departure process as a top priority. In addition, a 2014 survey by the Region Nine Development Commission showed that among children who live within the two-mile no-busing zone, 45 percent of children were driven to school. In the morning, just 7 percent of children walked to school, while 4 percent rode their bike. In the afternoon, 14 percent walked home, while 4 percent biked home and 27 percent were picked up. These walking rates are lower than the overall U.S. rates for walking to school. The Development Commission also conducted parent surveys, which found an overall sense of the area as being unsafe for walkers and bikers.

Jen Maurer, community engagement coordinator for New Ulm Medical Center and also a CASHS member, said, “Reducing childhood obesity is a top priority initiative of the Community Engagement Council and we fully support getting more children to walk and bike to school.”

Blue Cross-funded Active Places demonstration projects are temporary projects that aim to build momentum for future, long-term changes within a community. They help contribute to a long-term goal of making a community more amenable to walking, biking or other forms of physical activity. New Ulm’s planned school demonstration project builds off the momentum of other initiatives in the community to improve safety for people who bike or walk and create a community culture and environment that supports physical activity.

In August 2014, Garden Street was redesigned between S. Payne St. and Center St. to become safer with the addition of bike lanes on each side of the street and an enhanced mid-block crosswalk with an island and angled crosswalk, which provides greater safety and visibility for pedestrians around oncoming traffic.

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### **About Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project® and the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation®**

Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project is a collaborative partnership of Allina Health, the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation and the community of New Ulm designed to reduce the number of heart attacks among people who live or work in New Ulm, Minn.

The Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation (MHIF) is dedicated to creating a world without heart disease through groundbreaking clinical and population health research and community outreach. MHIF’s mission is to improve people’s lives through the highest quality cardiovascular research and education.

### **About the Center for Prevention**

The Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota delivers on Blue Cross’ long-term commitment to improve the health of all Minnesotans by tackling the leading root causes of preventable disease: tobacco use, lack of physical activity and unhealthy eating. Funded through proceeds from Blue Cross’ historic lawsuit against the tobacco industry, we collaborate with organizations statewide to increase health equity, transform communities and create a healthier state. Visit [CenterForPreventionMN.com](http://CenterForPreventionMN.com) for more information.

### **About Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota**

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota ([bluecrossmn.com](http://bluecrossmn.com)), with headquarters in the St. Paul suburb of Eagan, was chartered in 1933 as Minnesota’s first health plan and continues to carry out its charter mission today as a health company: to promote a wider, more economical and timely availability of health services for the people of Minnesota. Blue Cross is a not-for-profit, taxable organization. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, headquartered in Chicago.