Staying active is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle. But the nation’s reliance on automobiles, even for short trips, has resulted in Americans getting inadequate levels of physical activity. In Wisconsin, a majority of residents fail to meet the minimum amount of physical activity recommended each week, and that has contributed to a burgeoning weight problem. The American Heart Association has partnered with the nonprofit organization, Wisconsin Bicycle Fed, to create a new public engagement program, Bike Walk Civics. The program trains citizens how to effectively advocate for environments that encourage physical activity. Creating safe places for pedestrians and cyclists is important everywhere, but especially in more rural parts of Wisconsin, where there are fewer sidewalks and bike lanes.

The Challenge
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 60 percent of people living in Wisconsin do not get enough physical activity each week. Additionally, more than 30 percent of state residents are obese. One reason people are less physically active is because they rely more on their cars to get around. Many short trips to work or school can be replaced with walking or biking, both of which can contribute to a healthy lifestyle and reduce the risk of becoming obese, having a stroke or developing heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and other chronic illnesses.

“My goal as an avid bicyclist is to take the information that I learned from the workshop and to expand upon it by making elected officials in my community aware of the needs that exist for bicyclists.”

– Mark Quam, president of the Chippewa Valley Transit Alliance
The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program in Wisconsin is promoting physical activity to help communities live heart-healthy lives. The American Heart Association partnered with the largest bicycling advocacy group in the state, Wisconsin Bicycle Fed, to create the public engagement program, Bike Walk Civics. The program trains people on becoming champions for bike-and walk-friendly communities by educating them about issues and topics related to sustainable transportation. Local residents can participate in Bike Walk Civics either in person, during an all-day workshop held in northwest Wisconsin, or online through a series of six webinar sessions. The program is structured to be a flexible model that can meet the needs of communities in every corner of the state.

The Solution
On Aug. 19, 2016, citizens from six rural counties throughout northwest Wisconsin participated in the first all-day training session for Bike Walk Civics. The workshop was held in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, led by the staff of Wisconsin Bike Fed, who addressed topics such as: the health benefits of biking and walking; infrastructure design; community organization; bicycle, pedestrian and safety laws; and how to work effectively with local media and elected officials. The training program was also offered over a six-week timeframe with weekly webinars attended by additional Wisconsin residents participating in the online training for Bike Walk Civics. The American Heart Association and Wisconsin Bike Fed are now combing through program evaluations and making adjustments to the curriculum for the next round of workshops that will be offered in 2017.

Sustaining Success
Bike Walk Civics is intended to be part of a long-term strategy. After attending a day-long workshop or completing six webinar training sessions, program participants are encouraged to start reaching out to local decision makers to collaborate with and garner support for healthy living strategies such as the inclusion of sidewalks, bike routes and other opportunities to encourage physical activity in the community. The American Heart Association’s ANCHOR team will follow-up with program attendees to provide technical assistance in addressing any problems they might encounter during their community collaboration activities. Additionally, the American Heart Association is developing opportunities for building further engagement opportunities with participants through the use of a listserv where participants can share ideas and resources, and support each other.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The Bike Walk Civics program lays the groundwork for both systems and environmental changes. Program trainees will return home filled with knowledge about transportation policy and ideas about how to encourage their local leaders to incorporate bike and walk paths into existing community settings, as well as future design plans. These efforts will lead to the kinds of systemic changes needed to support and encourage active, healthy lifestyles.

Results
On Aug. 19, 2016, citizens from six rural counties throughout northwest Wisconsin participated in the first all-day training session for Bike Walk Civics. The workshop was held in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, led by the staff of Wisconsin Bike Fed, who addressed topics such as: the health benefits of biking and walking; infrastructure design; community organization; bicycle, pedestrian and safety laws; and how to work effectively with local media and elected officials. The training program was also offered over a six-week timeframe with weekly webinars attended by additional Wisconsin residents participating in the online training for Bike Walk Civics. The American Heart Association and Wisconsin Bike Fed are now combing through program evaluations and making adjustments to the curriculum for the next round of workshops that will be offered in 2017.

Get Involved
Learn more about Bike Walk Civics and find out details about upcoming workshops and online sessions in 2017 on www.WisconsinBikeFed.org.