Studies show that people who live in walkable neighborhoods get about 35-45 more minutes of moderate-level physical activity each week. They are also less likely to be overweight or obese than people who live in low walkability neighborhoods. In Wisconsin, a majority of residents fail to meet the minimum amount of recommended physical activity each week. That can lead to increased risks of obesity, heart disease, stroke, hypertension, diabetes, and other types of chronic illnesses. The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program partnered last year with the Wisconsin Bike Federation to create a public engagement initiative, Bike Walk Civics. The Bike Walk Civics initiative is now training community residents on the importance of walkable and bikable communities and encourages the community members to become health champions on the issue. The training educated community members on topics such as the economic and health benefits, and the importance of safe environments that encourage physical activity, and how to get involved.

The Challenge
The current adult obesity rate in Wisconsin is 31 percent, up from the 19 percent reported in 2000, according to the most current State of Obesity report. That spike is partly because Wisconsin residents fail to get enough physical activity each week. One reason people are less 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, and numerous other types of chronic diseases.

"Bike Walk Civics was helpful because it put into perspective how to communicate with decision makers on walking and biking issues. The training provided a clear systematic overview on the ways to help build support around issues." – Jason Duba, community champion and Eastside Hill Neighborhood Association member

Work made possible with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
The partnership between the American Heart Association’s and Wisconsin Bicycle Federation produced the public engagement program, Bike Walk Civics. The program trains citizens on becoming local champions for bike-and pedestrian-friendly communities by educating key stakeholders, volunteers and community members about sustainable transportation. The first round of program graduates are now applying their newfound knowledge to efforts to create safe places for walkers and cyclists. These local champions are meeting with organizations, business, leaders and decision-makers are working with city engineers and planners to raise awareness and encourage changes that will ensure a healthy and safe community environment.

Sustaining Success
The American Heart Association has continued to engaged the Bike Walk Civics program graduates to provide technical assistance and providing tools and resources. Next steps include surveying the trainees to assess how they have been utilized the knowledge and skills to help affect policy, systems and environmental changes within their communities.

Policy, System and Environmental Change
The work of the American Heart Association and the Bike Walk Civics program sets the foundation for policy, systems and environmental changes from the leadership training model implementation by engaging and empowering program trainees to become local champions on the issue. The aim of this approach is policy, systems and environmental changes will be adopted as a groundswell of support will be built to change the rural WI landscape make way for sidewalks, bike paths and stop signs, that can help encourage street traffic to slow down on busy roads.

Results
The partnership between the American Heart Association and the Bike Walk Civics program aims to engage community members to become biking and pedestrian champions throughout Wisconsin. People who have completed the training program are working to make their communities more accessible to parks, schools and jobs. In Eau Claire, Bike Walk Civics trainee Jason Duba has been an instrumental player in helping the Eastside Hill Neighborhood Association with its efforts to improve safety along Margaret Street, which houses both a school and a playground. The residential side road has been used as a cut-through for many speeding motorists during rush hour, creating safety hazards for people trying to travel along the road by foot or bike. Duba has helped his local neighborhood group push for stop signs and additional sidewalks. He said his Bike Walk Civics training gave him a deeper understanding of how to make their vision into a reality.

“Learning who to talk to in the city of Eau Claire helped our steering committee think more strategically how to organizing our neighbors,” he said. “We had a pretty successful campaign targeting leaders and decision makers.”

Get Involved
Bike Walk Civics teaches participants how to become effective bike and walk champions in their community. To learn more about the program, ways you can make your community safer, and details about upcoming workshops, head to the website of the non-profit organization, Wisconsin Bike Fed at www.WisconsinBikeFed.org.