

CITY OF PHILADELPHIA - MAYOR'S INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

WalkSafePHL

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August 8, 2013

I. Background

Two dozen Philadelphia schools closed at the conclusion of the 2012-2013 academic year. Over fifty schools will receive new students from the now-closed schools in 2013-2014. This shift has raised public safety concerns from parents and community members, as children assigned to new schools will be walking through neighborhoods with which they are unfamiliar on their way to new schools.

WalkSafePHL is a program that mitigates those concerns by creating safe walking corridors for children on their way to school. WalkSafePHL is an expansion of the Safe Corridors network in Philadelphia. The project is supported by Town Watch Integrated Services (TWIS), the Mayor's Office of Civic Engagement and Volunteer Service, the Mayor's Office of Education, the Philadelphia Police Department, PhillyRising Collaborative, the Office of Public Safety, the School District of Philadelphia, SEPTA Police, the Mayor's Internship Program (MIP), and community partners, including Bicycle Coalition, BuildOn, and EducatonWorks.

WalkSafePHL volunteers walked neighborhoods surrounding closing and receiving schools in order to create Safe Corridors and identify Safe Havens. A Safe Corridor is a safe walking route for children walking to school through unfamiliar neighborhoods. A Safe Haven serves as a safe space for children to go if they feel uncomfortable or in danger. From a Safe Haven, a child can call their parents, have someone call the police for them, or simply wait until they feel safe again. Some examples of Safe Havens include places of business, faith centers, and police stations.

II. Process

The Mayor's Internship Program, in partnership with the Deputy Director for Policy Programs and Administration at the Office of Public Safety as well as the Deputy Education

Officer to the Mayor, provided ten volunteer interns to canvass routes in different Philadelphia neighborhoods. Volunteers from the Bicycle Coalition, EducationWorks, and BuildOn also walked routes, though the information they collected is not included in this report.

The group began by discussing the logistics of canvassing. One important consideration was the time of day to go into communities. Volunteers decided that it was necessary to go into the communities on weekdays between one and four because it would most closely mimic the conditions school children would experience on their walk home from school. Business operating hours, traffic conditions, and community activity varied according to the time of day and the day of the week. The logistics meeting also included discussions on travel to and from communities, a major consideration since many communities were far from Center City. The meeting included general public safety background for canvassers.

Finally, the group discussed potential strengths and concerns of the routes. Potential strengths included public centers or institutions, such as businesses, faith centers, community centers, police stations, fire stations, libraries, other schools in the neighborhood, and restaurants. These establishments and institutions help create a safer, more welcoming environment for children, and all were potential Safe Havens. On the other hand, safety concerns included vacant lots, abandoned buildings, parks in the neighborhood, large or empty stretches of space, homeless shelters or clinics, large groups of people, bars, dangerous intersections, and lack of streetlights (which could be a problem in the winter). A critical mass of serious safety concerns could be cause to recommend a change in the route.

III. Results

MIP volunteers completed 30 Safe Corridor Routes and identified 68 Safe Havens along those routes. In general, there were three types of routes. Some routes consisted mainly of

residential properties, and some mainly followed commercial corridors. Other routes were a mix of business and residential neighborhoods.

The Longstreth SC route (see attached) is an example of a route with mainly residential properties. At first glance, a route that is mostly residential would seem relatively safe. However, these routes completely lacked potential Safe Havens, where children would go if they felt unsafe. A route without a single Safe Haven could be problematic, as it highlights a public safety concern.

An example of the route with mostly businesses was the South Philadelphia High School route (see attached), particularly the area between Broad and 15th streets on Snyder Avenue. This might seem ideal, because of the ample opportunities for identifying Safe Havens. However, a route with a majority of businesses runs the risk of being too crowded with pedestrians and vehicle traffic, which could pose a safety risk for small children. Fortunately, in this case, the route was intended for older children.

A more ideal route would feature a mix of residential and business properties. For instance, many routes covered by the volunteers featured blocks of homes with stores on the corners. This balance of residential and commercial properties is ideal because it provides the relative comfort of residential neighborhoods as well as Safe Havens in case of an emergency.

IV. Patterns

Over the course of the project, several patterns emerged. One consistent pattern across all parts of the city was that grocery and corner stores comprised a significant number of Safe Havens found - in total, they accounted for about 38% (26) of the total 68 Safe Havens. Volunteers specifically targeted these sites, as the group judged that children are more likely to frequent businesses that sell candy, snacks, sodas, and other products that appeal to them.

Moreover, one pair of volunteers spoke with a school principal who said that children are more likely to frequent businesses that are locally owned. Fortunately, this particular class of owners and managers were especially enthusiastic about the project, as so many of them are accustomed to large groups of children in their business. The distribution of the different types of Safe Havens identified is shown in Figure 1.

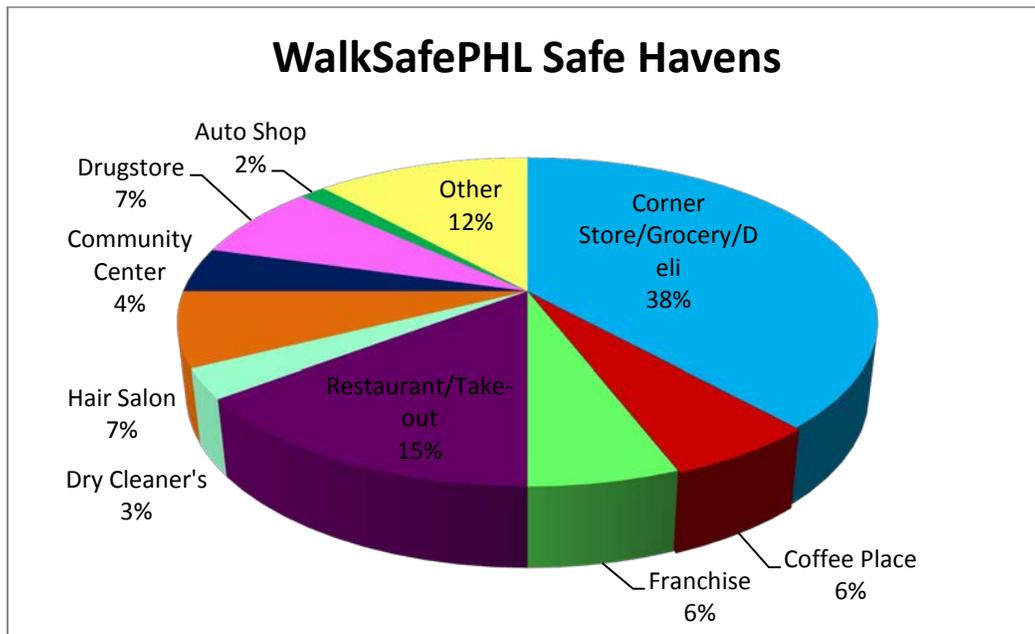


Figure 1. Types of Safe Havens.

One of the biggest concerns business owners raised was that they did not want their stores to become a place for children to congregate, which some saw as increasing risks of theft or vandalism, or possibly deterring other customers. However, many business owners were persuaded to participate with further explanation of the program. Many owners were also confused as to what was going to happen after signing up their business as a Safe Haven. Volunteers informed them that the next step would be a phone call from Town Watch, who

would confirm their participation and, in the near future, provide them with identifying signage for their window.

Many business owners and staff members at Safe Havens were enthusiastic about helping children get to school safely. Various institutions recruited as Safe Havens informed volunteers that they already perform this service for their community informally, and were happy to make this service official. Adding official weight to this activity will help increase visibility of the informal Safe Havens, which is especially important for children who are unfamiliar with a neighborhood.

More broadly, the WalkSafePHL program created a sense of awareness in the neighborhoods about a solution to the public safety problem caused by school closures. Volunteers often heard both Safe Haven staff and other residents express concerns about public safety related to closures. By spreading word of a solution to this problem, and by incorporating community members into the solution, WalkSafePHL helped create a sense of community empowerment.

Language barriers were a problem for many groups. Many business owners spoke Spanish, Chinese, Korean, or other languages, either primarily or exclusively. This was not always insurmountable. One pair of volunteers was able to reach an English speaker on the phone at a restaurant where the clerk spoke only Chinese. Because of the volunteers' persistence, the business agreed to be a part of the program. However, some businesses dismissed volunteers outright because they were unable to overcome the language barrier.

Certain other situations arose that were not covered in volunteer training. For example, the group was initially planning on soliciting every business along each route. However, this proved impractical in places with large numbers of businesses and forced volunteers to make

decisions in the field about which businesses children would be most likely to enter. Routes that had the opposite problem of no possible Safe Havens presented a unique public safety challenge, and in training, volunteers did not discuss alternative ways to increase safety along such routes. This was exacerbated by the fact that some volunteers were not familiar with Philadelphia and the surrounding geographic area that prevented them from suggesting alternate routes.

Finally, specific safety concerns popped up along many routes. These included a lack of crosswalks on busy roads, lack of sidewalk access due to ongoing construction, and large abandoned buildings such as closed schools and warehouses, as well as bars that have the potential to attract crowds of people in the afternoon.

V. Future

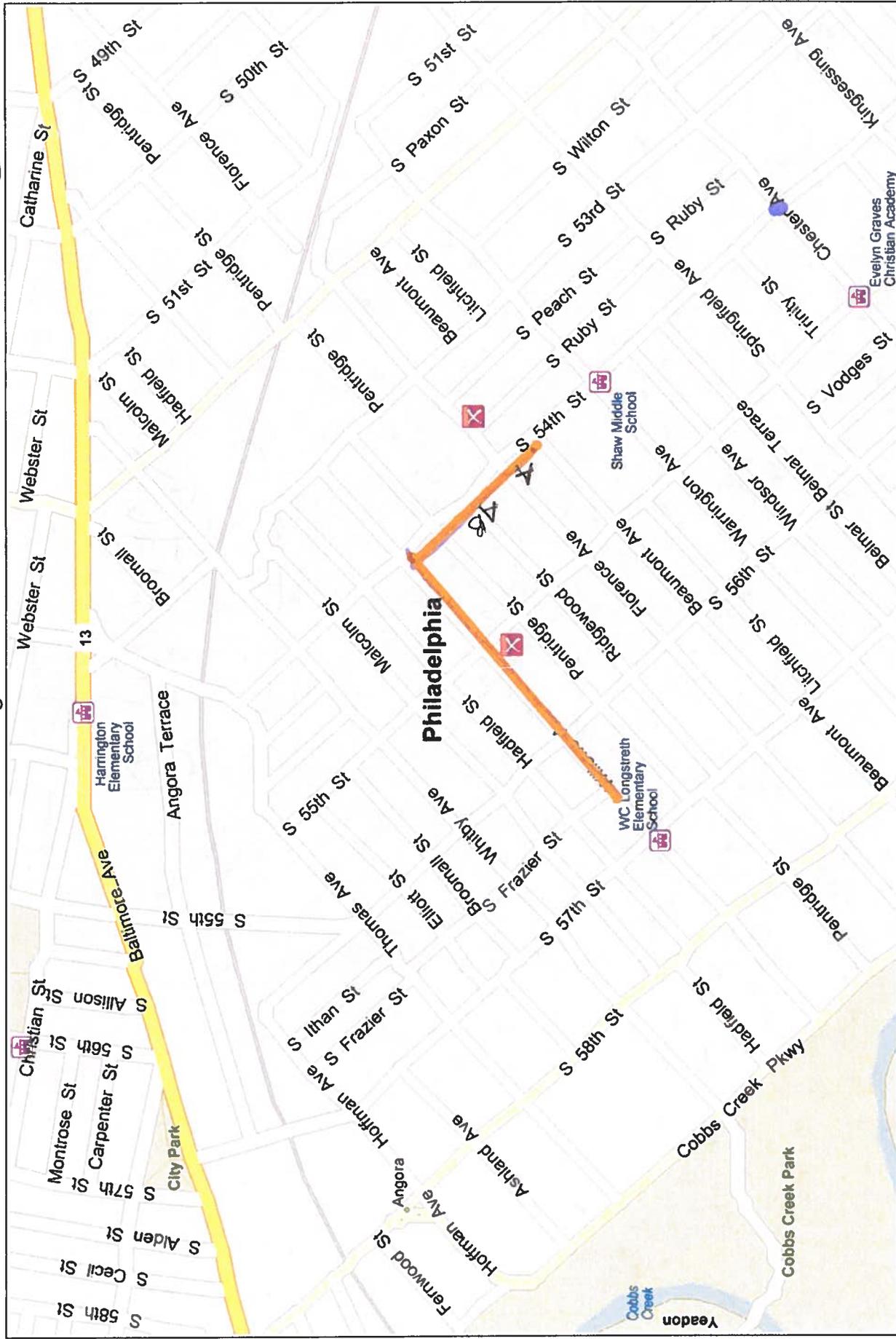
The future of the program is now in the hands of Town Watch Integrated Services, who will compile the information gathered by canvassers and distribute it to parents and community leaders before the start of the school year, primarily via the web. They will also contact Safe Havens to provide window signage. In the future, TWIS will be marking Safe Corridors with signs on sidewalks and streets.

During and after the school year, TWIS can evaluate the effectiveness of the program by tracking incidents along Safe Corridors, and by retrieving information from Safe Havens regarding both foot traffic along routes and use of Safe Havens by children.

For now, the most important next step for the WalkSafePHL Safe Corridors project is to distribute the information compiled by canvassers, via social media such as Facebook and Twitter or via information pamphlets distributed directly at schools. In the future, lessons learned during this round of Safe Corridor expansion can be used to streamline and improve the process as the Safe Corridor network continues to expand.

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Longstreth SC



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South Philadelphia High

