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**Annual Evaluation Report for Healthier Together
Calhoun: Coalition Member Interview Results**

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Background

Healthier Together Calhoun (HTC) is a project funded through a cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) High Obesity Program, managed by the University of Georgia's College of Public Health and implemented by University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. The goals of the cooperative agreement include increasing access to healthy foods and physical activity in communities with adult obesity rates over 40%. This grant was initially awarded in 2016, but was renewed in 2018 for an additional five years. The current project will continue through September 2023. This evaluation of the program's progress will cover activities completed in Year 1, from September 2018 through September 2019. In order to gain local expertise and input, a Healthier Together Calhoun (HTC) Coalition was formed with county leaders and stakeholders. Project staff and coalition members worked together to establish impactful projects that were appropriate for Calhoun County communities. These projects included community gardens, Grab-n-Go Coolers, walking trails, and improvements to other destinations within the county. Coalition members held monthly meetings until March 2020, when COVID-19 caused Gov. Brian Kemp to implement statewide shelter-in-place orders. COVID-19 impacted the project goals and implementation of HTC. An evaluation of the HTC project was initiated in April 2020 to assess how the project is progressing, to determine whether HTC was achieving its intended goals, and to identify successes and opportunities for growth through an appreciative evaluation lens. Despite setbacks from COVID-19, the results presented here demonstrate the positive impact HTC has had on Calhoun county.

Methods

One of the evaluation goals was to gain an understanding of the direct and indirect community impacts of the HTC coalition work. To achieve this goal, the evaluation team planned to conduct focus groups with coalition members in each county. However, due to COVID-19 and social distancing requirements, the evaluation team instead conducted one-on-one phone interviews with coalition members. The team developed an interview guide to explore coalition members' personal role in the coalition, the impact of COVID-19 on the project, physical activity, nutrition policy, and healthy food changes within the community, community acceptance, and future visioning and support.

While unable to reach all 32 coalition members in Calhoun county for whom the evaluation team had contact information, interviews were conducted with 13 coalition members. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Two members of the evaluation team then analyzed the interview transcripts for patterns in the interview transcript data, or dominant themes. To accomplish this, the team looked for common ideas in the responses. The two team members who analyzed the interview data reviewed the transcripts by themselves and then came together to compare notes and determine the final patterns and meaning of what was said. To ensure the trustworthiness of the results, themes and quotations were used to develop a codebook as part of an audit trail and analyzed by an evaluation team member who had not conducted any interviews. This report describes the major themes that emerged from the interviews with HTC coalition members in 2020.

Results

A summary of the major themes that emerged from the data is presented below.

Food Access

The current food system within Calhoun County includes one full-service grocery store, a small grocery market, and seven convenience stores/gas stations. One coalition member said that there is a "lack of fresh vegetables... in Leary, you have to drive 13, 16 miles to get to the local grocery store." Another coalition member described overall food availability: "We have no fast-food restaurants, no chain restaurants. We have one grocery store in our entire county." One coalition member noted that prices for fruits and vegetables are higher at the local grocery store than those at larger stores in larger

cities. This, in combination with the local poverty described by the coalition members, makes it difficult to choose healthy food options. “You’ve got parents that don’t have a lot of money and they may be on food stamps. They’re going to buy the cheapest thing at the store.” Further, lack of transportation adds to these challenges: “It’s kind of hard for the elderly to get around... It’s kind of hard to get what they need if they don’t have family members because it’s a low-income area.”

HTC projects that focus on food availability and access were described by coalition members. These projects primarily include community gardens and Grab-n-Go Coolers (GGCs). Overall, coalition members described a positive trend in food availability in Calhoun County communities. As one coalition member stated, “We’ve had better opportunities to have healthy foods available to individuals such as fresh fruits, fresh vegetables and things like that in the community.”

Gardens

HTC is connected to several small garden beds from an earlier grant and three larger gardens: The Cooperative Extension Garden, the Commissioners’ Garden, and Mr. Floyd’s Garden. According to coalition members, these gardens have accomplished two goals: providing healthy food to community members and creating interest in healthy food options.

According to coalition members, many families were able to take fruits and vegetables from the community gardens in Calhoun County. Beyond providing fruits and vegetables at no cost, these gardens expanded the overall availability of fresh produce in Calhoun. One member explained,

We hear a lot of good feedback, especially about the community gardens. People are so excited to be a part of that, and again, when you’re even in normal times when COVID wasn’t an issue, we still pay a lot more for our fruits and vegetables at our grocery store.

Similarly, the introduction of gardens throughout Calhoun County has increased local interest in gardening. Coalition members described people of all ages asking them about the produce being grown, how long certain vegetables took to mature, and how to cook the vegetables: “They watch us gardening and they come by and come in with, ‘How fast does this grow?’ This makes them want to try this or do that. They’ll be talking about the difference in taste or how it’s made and stuff like that.”

Grab-n-Go Coolers (GGCs)

According to coalition members, the GGCs have been well-received by the community. Multiple coalition members described the cooler at West IGA in Edison, Georgia:

Our grocery store owner... mentioned that he stocked his cooler, which is right when you walk in the door to get your buggy, that items in his cooler were selling out pretty much every other day... He would stock it with fresh salads and fruit... healthier choices, and people would grab that and then go to the register as opposed to walking to the back of the store to their deli and getting a fried pork chop and greens and cornbread.

According to coalition members, West IGA is one of the few locations in town where residents can buy prepared food – there is a deli in the back of the store that sells fried foods and sides for lunch. One coalition member explained how the GGCs increased healthy options in the store:

They cook lunch in the back and it's not necessarily unhealthy foods, but it's just like soul food. You know what I mean. Most of the meats are fried and then there'll be an assortment of vegetables which may or may not be cooked in lard or a lot of butter, whatever. It's not that they're really unhealthy but possibly

borderline. But now, we've got that standup, that fresh fruit or vegetable cooler there and it just gives people another option that they didn't have before. Those have been really popular.

The physical location of the cooler at the front of the store encourages the purchase of healthier items. One coalition member stated, "I think a lot of people are utilizing it," and another explained, "putting the stands in the grocery stores lets people know that they're a healthier alternative... you can go somewhere and get it [in the county]."

Another GGC is located at the Cooperative Extension office in Morgan, Georgia. This cooler stored harvested produce from the Cooperative Extension Garden located on that property for community members to take. One coalition member has begun to take her excess produce to this cooler as well, essentially donating it to the community: "You know, the cooler down there at the office in Morgan where the... Extension office is, anytime I have extra vegetables [from my home garden], I take them down there."

Physical Activity

The availability of exercise opportunities is very limited in Calhoun County. One coalition member described the importance of exercise opportunities in their county: "If there's [not] access to exercising, I mean, the kids can't get out, adults can't. When adults can walk to the care, whatever, but it got an impact on health and exercise issues." Another coalition member explained the difficulty of providing activity spaces for youth in the county: "we tried to get involved with the kids, which we have the [basketball] court... but you don't have much for young people to do [here]."

To address this lack of destinations and physical activity opportunities, the coalition focused on creating safe places to walk and destinations to walk to. One coalition member emphasized the benefits of having safe exercise/walking spaces, saying "giving them the tools of easy access to walking and again, being safe... You're not too worried about stray dogs or anything of that nature."

Walking Trails

Four walking trails were built in Calhoun County with a previous HOP grant. Another path was established leading to the baseball fields in Arlington, GA. Along the original four trails, outdoor exercise equipment was installed to create another destination to walk to. Coalition members were very complimentary of these paths, as summarized by the following comment:

Well, giving people a safe place to walk. That was the primary reason why we did this because there really wasn't a safe place. A lot of people like in Morgan would walk around the courthouse, which is the courthouse square. It still isn't safe because you still have cars, trucks going in and around, and it's right on one of our major highways. So, giving them a choice and a place that they can go and walk safely, it's well-lit, the ground is even, it's not uneven sidewalks or dirt on the side of the road.

Several coalition members noted that the paths are well-used. One coalition member, who lives near one of the paths, stated that they saw 79 individuals walking on the trail within a two-day period. Another stated that they often see the elderly walking on a path in the mornings.

Destinations

The addition of exercise equipment on the trails created a destination on the circular routes built in 2017-2018. One coalition member noted this combination of paths and destinations increased the usages of both – "[parents] can take their children and the children can exercise on the equipment on the inside of the perimeter of the walking trail, and they can keep their eye on them while they're still walking."

In addition to the exercise equipment, community gardens have also proved to be destinations for locals to walk to. Some coalition members noted that one of the gardens did not have easy walkable access, stating “we’ve been thinking about trying to put a trail around our garden area and a lot of people come in.” The combination of the walking trails, exiting sidewalks and walkable roads, and added destinations improving the walkability of the community was described by a coalition member: “I think by just having the gardens and the walking trails, giving people the opportunity to have somewhere to go, to exercise, and to do some of the other things that they need to be doing [to be healthy].”

Overall Impact

Coalition members were asked questions to determine the overall impact of the HTC project within their community. Several themes emerged from these questions: positive impact, bringing the community together, personal impact, community acceptance, and ripple effects.

Positive Impact

Four coalition members expressed that the HTC project has **helped the community**. One member stated,

I think it's been a great impact and access for everybody in the community because they feel, everyone could take part in it and wants the groups get together and get educated on it, they take it back to the community, the churches and let them know what's going on. So, it has impacted the whole county.

Another coalition member described how the program has increased the resources available for the community: “it takes other things like the coalition ... to come in and try to bring people's awareness up and give people the opportunity to get some of the things that is not being provided by the local government.”

In addition, one coalition member reflected, “with everything that's going on [COVID-19] ... they were still looking for different projects and things that we could do upcoming. I think they are always trying to improve things.” Another member explained that the coalition “brings new ideas to the community, think outside of the box.” One member expanded on this idea:

[The coalition] it makes you think out of the box, because a lot of times you've got tunnel vision, and you don't think about stuff, and then when they come in, they will bring a new life. What you thought, "Oh, well yeah. That might be cool.

Three coalition members described **lifestyle changes** observed from the project. One member stated, “I think they've done a really good job and I can tell... well, I can tell that it's made a difference in what they've done.” Another coalition member simply said, “it’s a good program. It works.” One coalition member explained, “we've seen real lifestyle changes throughout the community in that the way people look at their health and how they eat and also how they exercise and have made it a priority.” Another noted how the coalition increased people’s knowledge about food and health. This member stated,

People [are] more mindful of their health and really the transformations because a lot of times you would think that people just inherently know how to eat healthy, but really you don't and once you learn it, it's really easy to follow that path, but it's really not that evident in a lot of cases. And just that transformation of just being more mindful of what they eat and how they treat their body with the healthier foods and with the exercise really has been a large benefit to me.

Another member echoed this sentiment by saying, “you got to know your body to know what's going on with it. And to stay aware of changes in your body. The coalition will help with that.”

Another theme that emerged here was **benefits of focusing on the community**. Within this theme, three coalition members explained how much of the positive impact came from figuring out what is best for this particular community. One coalition member explained, “they try to get each group to kind of figure out what's best for their own community or what they can do with each community.” Another member added,

The planning actually comes from the community members. Input from people who are here is so vital because we all know how it works. We all know the challenges we face with other ... having any resources and communication challenge[s]. So involving the community I mean is ... having the community and the coalition members who are the community make the decisions and these plans, I mean it's invaluable because there's too many times that you might have somebody from Atlanta or another state try and say, "Oh y'all need this and y'all need to do it this way." Well, no, your way is not going to work because your way works for a county of half a million people, but it doesn't work for our area.

Bringing the Community Together

This was the most described impact of HTC by seven out of the thirteen participants. This theme demonstrated how the coalition helped enhance a sense of community within Calhoun county. One coalition member explained “the greatest achievement is it has brought the community together. I can see them come together through the coalition.” Other coalition member explained how the project helped cities work together in ways they had not previously. One described how “it's very hard in Calhoun County to get [the] four cities to come together on anything. This was a great opportunity they took advantage of.” Another coalition member recalled how the relationship between the four cities:

Used to be like more of a competition. They had this, they didn't care if anybody else in the other part of the county had it or whatever. It was just for that area, [but now] everybody starts speaking about what they could do to make improvements... I don't feel like Edison, Arlington, Morgan, and Leary had all been in the same place talking the same thing about trying to make the area and [how when] problems affect one, [they] affect everything in Calhoun County.

One coalition member reflected, “it's been real encouraging to me to see the communities come together and be able to identify something that's a real issue that they've been dealing with for a long time and haven't really found a lot of solutions.”

Personal Impact

Seven coalition members described the positive impact working with the coalition had on them personally. Generally, coalition members enjoyed the work: “Sometimes I'm tired when I do the work, but I enjoy it, I think. I enjoy what I'm doing. I enjoy it.” One coalition member noted how they enjoyed the opportunity to work with people, stating “as a whole, I know that working with them is fantastic.” Another coalition member echoed this sentiment: “I'm a people person and they're very friendly and really [and] that's one thing, maybe, they've offered me... is getting to know more people that I didn't know prior.” Other coalition members explained they felt “fulfilled” and that working with the coalition was “inspiring” and “rewarding.”

Two coalition members believed they had learned a lot through the work, saying “I learn something every week or sometimes every day. I don't know, it's been educational” and how “it educated me on how you should be eating right and you supposed to exercise right but the people come and let you know the importance of exercising and healthiness to exercise and then how it stops some diseases.”

Community Acceptance

Coalition members were asked if community members were accepting of the changes brought by HTC. Seven participants indicated the community accepted the changes and had positive reactions to what the coalition has implemented. One coalition member said, “[the changes] have been very appreciated, the people I talked to [are] really glad to have that in the community... I think they really enjoy it.” Another noted,

The community has definitely accepted everything that has been thrown at them... I mean, I haven't heard any negative input because it's an entirely positive program. Every dollar that has been spent has positively impacted that particular area. It's been well received... It's inspiring [and] encouraging to be able to work with the community and to see some of the transformations that we've seen.

Despite the general acceptance, a theme emerged from six coalition members related to the **difficulty of change**. One coalition member discussed how some community members have been slow to adopt some of the changes. This coalition member stated,

It's something new ... and I think people still are getting on board with when they see something happen or something put in, they have to get information on who gets to use it, who it's for, and stuff like that. I think they receive it well but it's slow. Any time people make a change or see something they're not accustomed to having or not having around, they're slow about responding to it.

Another member explained, “it is hard to change people out of old habits. That's just life. It's hard to get people on board with something that they've never done before.” Other coalition members described how it will take time to make changes of this degree -- “we didn't get this way overnight, and we're not going to change it overnight.” This coalition member explained it will take “a strong sustainability plan and ... some funding to last several more years after [the CDC] funding stream ends.” However, this member also described positive perceptions of the project within the community, indicating a potential for change in the coming years. This potential is improved due to the involvement of elected officials within the county. When asked what has been the greatest thing that has come from HTC, one member responded,

The greatest thing ... would have to be the collaboration between elected officials, citizens, churches or faith-based... We see a little bit of that [through Family Connection], but through the Coalition it's been more evident because bigger projects demand more people, and especially elected officials to be involved. The positive change of seeing more elected officials actually involved in the Coalition, that's been super because it's very difficult to get our elected officials all in one place at one time. And even though they're not all there at the meeting at one time, they do send representation from the city, which, that's a very positive thing for our County.

Thus, despite the difficulty of change within the community, there is an opportunity for increased community acceptance and adoption based on the foundation already laid by the work of the coalition.

Ripple Effects

Coalition members were asked what effects the coalition work has had on other communities or counties. One effect described was that as other communities learned about the work of HTC, they would contact coalition members about ways “they could possibly do something similar.” One coalition member stated that people who visit the community “admire the walking trail.” Another coalition member explained that neighboring communities were impressed by and interested in the GGCs.

One coalition member described how the project increased his awareness of the need for HTC and how other rural counties could benefit from programs like this:

It's made me aware that we need to do this in so many of these rural counties. They get all these monies for food, but they don't know how to properly buy healthy foods. They don't know how to make healthy meals. These are young families, lot of young families, single parents and they do fast food type eating because probably the mother is ... I'm trying to say about all the kids that she may have a part time job, may not. You know, but everything is so fast food and not healthy at all.

Another coalition member hoped that the coalition work would motivate other communities to engage in similar work.

Future Impact and Visioning

Coalition members were asked what their ideal vision was for what the coalition has accomplished in three years, and what needed to be done to achieve that vision.

Specifically, seven coalition members hoped for a **healthier community**. This included people making healthier choices when shopping for food and cooking, as well as a desire to see a decline in obesity and chronic disease. One coalition member stated, “Maybe everybody, [will] start eating healthier and there won't be so many weight problems going on.” Another noted,

My overall hope is that our health statistics might have moved down a bit. Again, I'm not looking for major changes in those benchmarks because it's going to take some time to get there. But that's my biggest hope is that we have better health stats for our county overall.

Another coalition member hoped that people would “recognize and see that maybe the foods that they were putting in their body or the lack of exercise were attributing to some of their issues,” having a greater awareness of the connection between food, exercise, and health.

A general theme that emerged was a **hope to continue the work**. Five members just expressed a desire to continue in the current direction. One member noted, “if we keep up the motivation that we have and don't drop it, I think we'll be doing great, doing greater three years from right here.” Another member explained that the coalition has already “laid a solid foundation, [...] we have a very good starting point... I think building upon what we have would be the steps I would take.” Moving forward, the coalition should “keep the community first as the first perspective and what the people want. Just kind of always look at what they would like and indulging their opinions and thoughts.”

Another theme was **expansion of current projects**. Furthering the idea of building upon the foundation, four coalition members hoped to expand and increase the number of community gardens, including implementing a raised bed system as well as expanding a farmer's market. Two coalition members wanted to increase the number of walking trails and exercise equipment to encourage more people to engage in physical activity. One member even suggested establishing a bike trail.

Outreach was another theme related to the future of the project, described by eight coalition members. One coalition member explained how they need to increase community education related to healthy eating and physical activity, especially in the schools. Increased outreach was key to the sustainability of change:

Well, you just can start it and then the program ends. You got to keep pushing and you got to involve other groups. You got to involve the schools, churches, you got to talk about neighborhood groups. You got to keep it going. Or else people lapse back and the opportunity that we had going will fail us.

One member explained, “we should continue with educating the leaders of the group or the coalitions as in the community leaders, so they could keep educating their community.”

Other coalition members echoed this need for increased outreach by wanting increased youth participation. One member stated, “[we need] more participation with especially the younger people, getting them more involved in something active and healthy and creative. Keeping them involved in it.”

Four coalition members hoped for a **greater sense of community** through continuing to bring people together. One member stated, “I just want the community to come together. That’s my main thing. I want everybody to work together, not to have these little outside groups.” Another member hoped to “grow stronger as a community, and healthier as a community.” One member expressed that increased collaboration was a necessity, especially with the limited resources available to the community. This member hoped “that for a community as small as we are and with the limited resources we already have or with our limited resources that we were still able to do something huge.”

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the interview data and the specific suggestions from HTC coalition members about next steps for the project, the evaluation team has presented several recommendations for the HTC project.

1. HTC coalition members should increase targeted efforts to community members in most need but least involved with HTC’s work. While several coalition members indicated the difficulty of getting people to change, they also noted what a strong foundation the project created in the first two years. Building off this foundation is key to increasing HTC’s impact for those in the community in most need of the resources HTC can provide. To assist in this effort, emphasis should be placed on:
 - a. Increasing communication strategies beyond social media and local papers.
 - b. Including more activities within the school, churches, and other neighborhood groups.
2. HTC coalition members should begin to plan for sustained sources of funding beyond the CDC cooperative agreement with the Healthier Together project. Increased communication and outreach to local officials and county and state agencies could increase opportunities for community partners.
3. Expand the community gardens installed and create more within the county to increase healthy food access in the communities. These efforts would benefit from targeting community groups not currently involved with HTC.
4. Increase the number and quality of walking trails in the community to further increase physical activity within the county. The feedback thus far has been overwhelmingly positive.
5. While COVID-19 presented unanticipated challenges, it also revealed strengths from the HTC project and new opportunities:
 - a. Community gardens offered an alternative source of food during the early months of the pandemic. Thus, increasing community garden production could enhance community resilience in preparation for future public health crises.

- b. While shelter-in-place and lockdown orders decreased physical activity opportunities, the HTC coalition members could use this as an opportunity to advertise outdoor exercise opportunities provided by the walking trails as a way to increase safe, socially distanced community activity and exercise. Several coalition members indicated lockdown increased people's desire for exercise opportunities, so capitalizing on this momentum and motivation not only will increase current members' use of physical activity spaces but may also provide an opportunity to advertise these spaces to community members not currently using them.
- c. One coalition member explained how COVID-19 helped them realize the hospitality and generosity of the community, and another coalition member explained how the lockdown encouraged community members to reach out and connect with each other more. Using this sense of togetherness, established in part by the work of HTC and enhanced by the pandemic, HTC can act on this momentum and positive impact of the project to reach into new sectors of the community which may not have been motivated to participate in HTC projects prior.

Overall, HTC has had a positive impact on the community. Recommendations include capitalizing on the current progress made by the coalition to expand the reach and activities being done in the communities. This would not be possible without the successful work already implemented by the coalition. Building on the momentum established from the first year and a half of the project is the key to sustainability and success over the long-term.