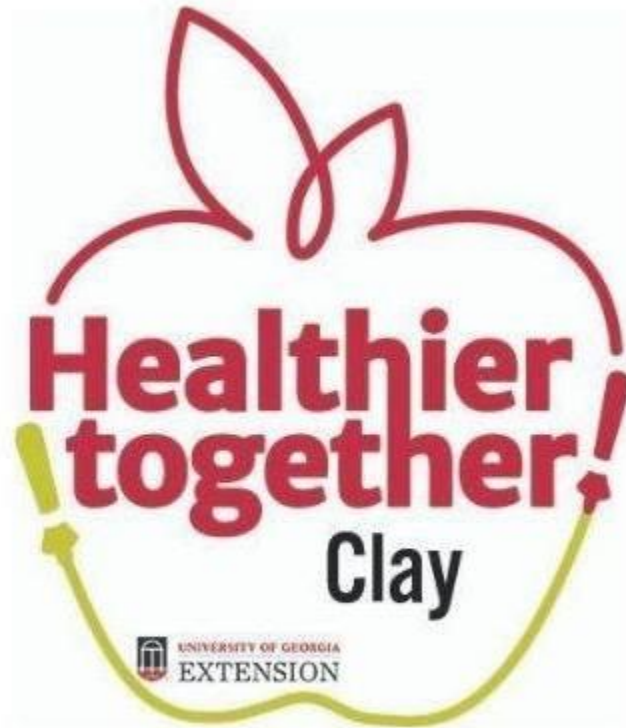


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## **Annual Evaluation Report for Healthier Together Clay: Coalition Member Interview Results**

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## Background

Healthier Together Clay (HTC) is a project funded through a cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC)'s 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 awarded in September 2018 and 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 Clay Coalition was formed with county leaders and stakeholders. Project staff and coalition members worked together to establish impactful projects that were appropriate for Clay county communities. These projects included a Grab-n-Go Cooler, a walking path, and wayfinding signs.

Coalition members held regular 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 working, 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 Clay county.

In Clay county, there is a separate ongoing project called the Two Georgia's Initiative, which is run through the Healthcare Georgia Foundation. This project has similar goals to HTC, and there are a few overlapping projects. This evaluation report only addresses projects sponsored under the HTC/CDC's High Obesity Program.

## 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 nine coalition members in Clay county for whom the evaluation team had contact information, interviews were conducted with four 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 retail system within Clay County includes one grocery store and several gas stations. With this limited access to healthy food in mind, HTC coalition members started projects to improve the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables in the county.

#### *Grab-n-Go Cooler*

The main project for food access in Clay county was the establishment of a Grab-n-Go Cooler (GGC) in Rubo's Grocery Store. This cooler is used to hold ready-to-eat healthy meals and snacks prepared at the store. A coalition member described the changes: "Rubo's is stocking better produce, [making it] more accessible."

Plans for a second cooler were delayed due to COVID-19, when the local deli that was planning to host it was forced to close temporarily. One coalition member described their hope that it would reopen:

I know we have a little deli that they're planning. Tragically, it's shut down now because of the virus thing. But I know the lady in there, and we were going to put up our healthy sandwich wrap-it-and-go case in there. And she is anxiously awaiting that.

### Physical Activity

The availability of exercise opportunities in Clay county, within city limits, is fairly limited. Although George T. Bagby State Park is nearby, it is not an every-day destination for locals. To encourage community members to walk between destinations within Fort Gaines city limits, the HTC coalition focused on adding walking paths and posting wayfinding signs.

#### *Walking Trail*

The main physical activity project completed by HTC is the walking path connecting the health clinic, Frontier Village Historical Site, Jackson Street, and Jackson Street Park. This path is "about a mile long." The coalition hopes that this trail will encourage outdoor physical activity in children by connecting to the Jackson Street Park, where there are future plans for park revitalization. As one coalition member described their goal, "The emphasis is on kids recreation. Ball equipment, basketballs, goals [for the park]."

#### *Wayfinding Signs/Trail Guide*

Another project that coalition members have focused on is the creation and posting of wayfinding signs Fort Gaines. These signs let visitors and residents know how long it takes to walk to common locations. Coalition members also created a guide for historic features of the town:

We have about a mile-long historic walking tour of Fort Gaines. It has 38 different stops on it, and we had signs made. We have them made to go by each of the sites, whether it be an old commercial building, or a historic house, or whatever. And we developed a booklet, and it's 32 pages long, that goes along with that.

## Overall Impact

Coalition members were asked questions to determine the overall impact of the HTC project within their community. Coalition members described various positive impacts of HTC on the community in Clay county. While some community members felt there had been limited change – “we make a little progress, but it kind of feels like it's baby steps, because there's so much to do.” – successes were described by three interview participants.

Three coalition members felt there was overall **community acceptance** of HTC's work. One coalition member explained, “[the community has] been very open to it because they hunger for it. I mean, not just physically hunger for it, but they understand the importance of learning that.” Another coalition member said people “very much enjoyed” the work being done.

One coalition member described the **opportunities for senior citizens** provided by HTC. This coalition member explained,

Sometimes adults that have worked their whole life and have gone to that situation, don't feel like all the programs are for them. You know what I'm saying? They think they're for everybody else and that they're not entitled to it now. I think that's something that I've learned from hearing him talk about how much it means to him. To be able to have access to that [...] So I think those are important projects that we need to do for our senior citizens. I think sometimes they may not eat as nutritiously as they should because it's a lot of trouble for one person.

Another positive impact was providing **increased access to healthy food** closer to home. One coalition member described this benefit as “[not [having] to go out of town to go shopping and they've had the opportunity to interact and get involved in it right here at home.”

## Obstacles

HTC coalition members described various obstacles that hindered the progress of the project in the community. The first was **lack of resources**, described by all three coalition members. One coalition member stated, “change doesn't happen overnight, and resources don't always stay, so you're always looking for the next resource, or the next resource. There's good people here.” Another explained how HTC “confirm[ed] that we have long way to go [...] the infrastructure of our community is weak to say the least.” Another coalition member described needed resources for community institutions:

I would just say that the main problems that I find out in little towns is the same people need everything and they're spread real thin. And even though you may want to do more, that may be all you have time for. And it would be best... It'd be nice if we could get some more environment and maybe more for the churches, because that's where people go for socializing in. A lot of spiritual foods. So physical world's not that far behind.

Another coalition member described **separations within the community**, specifically related to racial disparities, limiting involvement with HTC projects and resources. This coalition member said,

That was really, really frustrating for me to try to break the barrier there of [white youth] thinking that the program really wasn't for them. That it was just for the black kids here in town, and it's not the way it was. We really pushed hard to try to keep that from being the way they felt about it, about doing a variety of programs. It's just really hard to get the two [community groups] to work together or interact with each other. That was very, very frustrating for me. Because I feel like both missed an opportunity. And I think

mainly, and as you look at it now with what's going on in world, I think that may be what makes things feel so... Hate to use the expression black and white, but because there was no community involvement between the two, right.

Additionally, two coalition members felt **not enough people take advantage of resources** available to them through HTC. One coalition member explained,

You've got some people that recognize the value of it, and they'll take advantage of it, and some are still not. They're still just going to go with what's easy, and walk across the street and grab a bag of chips, rather than going and picking a vegetable and preparing it, you know.

## 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. Three themes emerged from these questions: greater access to fresh produce, more opportunities for exercise, more health consciousness, and greater church involvement.

Three coalition members hoped for **greater access to fresh produce**. This included implementing a farmer's market, according to three coalition members: "I'd like to see us maybe have a farmer's market where you could go at purchase fresh food." Additionally, two coalition members wanted more vegetable and plant production, hoping that "in three years from now, we're no longer a food desert."

Two coalition members wanted **more opportunities for exercise**. One coalition member hoped that "people could have access to where they can go exercise." Another coalition member expressed the desire that Clay county would "no longer [be] a play desert."

Another coalition member hoped the community would be **more health conscious**. This coalition member explained how they observed community members

Buying unhealthy stuff that's not good for them, that's not really benefiting them. It's like when we gave the food vouchers [for the Two Georgia's Project], we told them, "This is for staple foods. This is not for... You don't go buy sodas, candy and chips with it. This is for, you buy potatoes, and meat and potatoes and rice and beans, and your vegetables." We've made that a stipulation with our food vouchers. They couldn't just buy anything.

They expressed hope that HTC could make people more health conscious about nutrition choices.

Two coalition members described how, to increase HTC's success in the community, they would need **greater church involvement**. One coalition member said,

Church is where you really need your social and your interaction and all. We worked really hard to redo a [inaudible] at city hall and we did it for a place for them to have their own. We told them, "This is you all's place, where you can come and have programs and events and recreation and arts."

Another coalition member explained, "hopefully [we can] get some of these programs into some of these churches, and they can start organizing? Hopefully that will be something they will continue on with after, and kind of get it going."

## 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. Brainstorm alternative methods of increasing healthy food access in Clay county.
  - a. Depending on the resiliency of the partner restaurant, it may be necessary to find another location for the GGC.
  - b. Consider exploring retail options for the distribution of fresh produce in the community, potentially through a farmer's market. The development and sustainability of a farmer's market requires connecting with local farms and a strong organizational structure, as well as specific plans for maintaining supply to the market.
2. Consider formalizing the connection between the pathway near the Frontier Village Historic Site and the Jackson Street Park. Consider adding wayfinding signs or creating a policy proposal to connect the two locations by sidewalk next time Jackson Street is repaved.
3. Formalize outreach plans for increasing church involvement with HTC projects.
4. Expand beyond the current communication efforts to bring both new community leaders and younger community members to the coalition.
  - a. By increasing communications to the public, the coalition can share progress, updates, and requests, as well as garner interest in the program from residents of Clay county.
  - b. This includes both external communications to the community as well as ensuring internal communications within the coalition to provide a consistent message.
5. Recruitment efforts should focus on building partnerships and relationships with other leaders from non-involved communities within the county. This extended recruitment could encourage more involvement by these groups within the community. Strategic partnerships are critical for increasing involvement and engagement with HTC.
  - a. Representation is key to buy-in for non-involved communities. To increase non-involved membership, especially with younger community members, it is important to determine who are the influential leaders within these communities.
    - i. Who are the leaders with influence within this community? Not all influential people within the community are traditional or typical leaders.
    - ii. Finding these influencers will be crucial to attract younger members of the community to become involved with HTC.

Overall, HTC has had a positive impact on the community. Recommendations included 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.