

November 2020



Annual Evaluation Report for Healthier Together Stewart: Coalition Member Interview Results

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Suggested Citation

Dobbins, K., Southall, H., Lamm, A., & Berg, A. (2020). Annual Evaluation Report for Healthier Together Stewart: Coalition Member Interview Results. Athens, GA: University of Georgia College of Public Health, College of Family and Consumer Sciences, and College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.

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Acknowledgments

The evaluation team would like to recognize the following people, whose support and assistance made this data collection possible.

Marsha Davis, Ph.D. – Dean of Health Promotion and Behavior in the University of Georgia College of Public Health

Grace Holmes – Healthier Together Educator, University of Georgia Extension Southwest District

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Funding Acknowledgement

Funding for this project was provided through the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) High Obesity Program cooperative agreement, CDC-RFA-DP18-1809.

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Background

Healthier Together Stewart (HTS) 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 Stewart Coalition was formed with county leaders and stakeholders. Project staff and coalition members worked together to establish impactful projects that were appropriate for Stewart county communities. These projects included community gardens, Grab-n-Go Coolers, wayfinding signs, and additions to parks.

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 HTS. An evaluation of the HTS project was initiated in April 2020 to assess how the project is working, to determine whether HTS 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 HTS has had on Stewart county.

Methods

One of the evaluation goals was to gain an understanding of the direct and indirect community impacts of the HTS 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 eight coalition members in Stewart county for whom the evaluation team had contact information, interviews were conducted with six 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 HTS 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 Stewart County includes one grocery store, three dollar stores, and several gas stations. With this limited access to healthy food in mind, HTS coalition members started projects to improve access to fresh fruits and vegetables in the county.

Grab and Go Coolers

Another healthy food access project started by HTS was the establishment of a Grab-and-Go Cooler (GGC). This cooler is currently set up in the Richland City Hall for residents to purchase healthy pre-prepared meals and fresh produce. One coalition member described why it was essential to have this cooler available to the community:

Just being able to provide them fresh fruit and vegetables here, because at our city we have no local grocery store, so they have to travel to get fresh produce or fresh fruits. And so being able to bring it to City Hall, they can walk up here to get it instead of having to pay somebody to go get collards or onions or squash and stuff like that.

Community Gardens

There are two main community gardens in Stewart county, the Richland Community Garden and the Lumpkin Teaching Garden. Both of these gardens are maintained by volunteers and open to the public. One coalition member described the gardens as their most well-known intervention: "We have [the gardens] up and going and people see, they see the vegetables and they see how it is really being worked. There's people in the community [...] gathering vegetables and taking them home."

Another coalition member described how community members were excited about the gardens and how the produce from the gardens is valuable in the community:

Like I said everybody, they're very very excited about the summer crop now. "When is it going to be planted?", they're ready for fresh tomatoes, they're ready for fresh squash, my gosh they're ready for fresh everything because sometimes you just cannot get it, or it's very limited.

Because of this visibility, coalition members believe that there is now more interest in both availability of produce and healthy eating in Stewart county. "I'm seeing more people getting interested in the garden itself. And I know that when the summer crop comes out, we're going to see more people get very interested." The community gardens were identified as the main source of increased healthy food access within the community. One coalition member estimated the impact of the garden reached six people consistently within the community, while another estimated that number closer to 10 to 13 individuals. Another coalition member guessed the impact of the garden and healthy food options was around 25% of the community.

One coalition member stated that some community members did not feel comfortable taking produce from the garden if they had not volunteered. This resulted in difficulties finding people to take food from the garden and leading to food waste. The coalition member described how some people are "not willing to even take the stuff that we would bring to them."

Physical Activity

The availability of exercise opportunities in Stewart county, within city limits, is fairly limited. To encourage walking around the community, coalition members focused on creating plans for walking trails, making parks more enjoyable, and placing wayfinding signs. In general, community members saw “more people walking than before.” One coalition member stated that even though it is “hard to gauge” the impact of physical activity, “if there was one additional person [walking], it would be a significant number, because our community has so few people.”

Walking Trail Plans

Overall, walking trail plans were still in the development stage. One coalition member explained, “right now, with the walking trail, we are still working on how we're going to get everything set up, and getting volunteers to come in and help out with different things.”

Wayfinding Signs

Another project that coalition members have focused on is the creation and posting of wayfinding signs in each Stewart county community. These signs let visitors and residents know how long it takes to walk to common destinations. One coalition member described their motivation for these signs:

I think it's been a lot of motivation with the literature that's gone out to them and also the signs that it has helped to motivate them to get up and walk and the showing know how far you can go and then try and increase every time you get out to go and walk a little bit further.

Park Additions

In order to revitalize existing park areas within Stewart county, coalition members focused on making small additions, such as basketball goals and nets. There are plans to make larger changes to the parks in the next year, though some of these projects were delayed due to COVID-19.

Overall Impact

Coalition members were asked questions to determine the overall impact of the HTS project within their community. Coalition members described various positive impacts of HTS on the community in Stewart county. While some community members felt there had been limited change, successes were described by all five interview participants. One coalition member explained,

I think the Coalition [does] a great job, because they are out working all the time. As a matter of fact, if they aren't calling someone, they're out talking to somebody all the time. So that's, I think, that's a great role that everybody has been doing. A matter of fact, we don't even have to ask our different members, we don't even have to ask the other members to come. Other people to come out and do stuff.

One success described by five coalition members was how HTS has **brought the community together**. One coalition member explained that HTS has “brought the community even closer together.” Another coalition member stated that due to the “historic battle between Lumpkin and Richland [...] the two towns don’t get along, and yet we have seen some cooperation between Lumpkin and Richland and the other communities, which is a major step forward.” One coalition member added to this concept by stating how the grant is “developing a sense of community.”

Additionally, two coalition members described how HTS **increased healthy food access** within the community, specifically through the gardens. One coalition member explained how, before the gardens, “you would have to travel eight to 30 miles to get an onion, and since we had [the garden] here, you can just walk up and get it.”

Another aspect of improved health was seeing **increased walking**, described by four coalition members. One coalition member explained,

Right now we're getting more people out exercising, because once everyone started talking about walking and getting a walking trail set up, there seemed to be more people interested in walking, because we have people walking around and walking to the park.

Five coalition members described the **community acceptance** of changes implemented by HTS. One coalition member stated,

Everyone that I've spoken with has been grateful for of the changes and providing, like I said, some activities for their kids and their selves and also providing where they can get groceries without having to pay somebody to go get them.

Another coalition member explained how people are:

Very excit[ed] that something's going on in a small community. A lot of good things don't happen in our small communities, we don't have the funds, we don't have the means. So this is something that's very exciting to all of us.

Related to community acceptance, one coalition member explained that “if we didn’t have [the program] next year, people would complain.”

Obstacles

HTS coalition members described various obstacles that hindered the progress of the project in the community. The first is **limited success working with stores**, described by two coalition members. One coalition member stated,

We couldn't get the convenience stores to pay attention to what we were doing. We wanted to put a refrigerator in their store where they would sell healthy foods. They would get the profits, we would just sort of facilitate it. Nobody was interested. Dollar General wouldn't do it.

Another coalition member explained HTS “couldn’t get a location to put more healthy foods in. That wasn’t [what] the stores were interested in.”

An addition obstacle to the HTS project is the **difficulty of recruiting volunteers**, as explained by one coalition member: “It’s hard to find people who will actually show up [...] We’re limited because we’re a small community and there are only a few people who are willing to actually put effort into something.”

Expanding upon this difficulty are the perceived **separations between White and Black community groups**. This issue was identified by four coalition members. One coalition member described HTS as “made up mostly of White participants that are the same people that try to keep things going, and it’s a relatively small group in the community.” Another coalition member explained how:

Right now, our volunteer base is, we get more white help than we can black help, because the black [citizens in the community] feel, oh, I don't know, are a little reluctant. I say yes that they help out in a lot of ways, because I think they feel, most of the black feel left out on a lot of things.

Despite these issues in the community, with historical roots beyond the HTS coalition, one coalition member stated that “[HTS] is bringing people together for the same pupose. Not just one purpose or whites. One group of people.”

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: diversifying coalition membership, bringing the community together, and creating a healthier community.

Three coalition members identified **diversifying coalition membership** as a necessity for the continuity of HTS in the future. One coalition member said,

A lot of the members of the committee that are involved, are older folks. So we don't have any young talent, and we need people like that in the community, that have been part of the community, will be a part of the community and aren't kind of on their downward swing in terms of their energy and capacity to do things. We haven't attracted those kinds of people. I doubt there's anybody younger than in their fifties in our group. So, that would be a goal of mine, is to try and attract somebody, or several people, into the group that would be able to carry on and see that as a positive thing.

Another coalition member echoed this, saying,

Well, hopefully we can get something for the younger people to get them more interested in what's going on. If we could do that, the vision will last longer, because right now, if you have people in their 60s and 70s out doing everything, it won't last as long. But if you could bring, we could bring some younger people here, get them involved, let them see what's going on, it will make the community ... It will make it last longer, plus it will give our children, not children, more younger people will get involved, and make them more healthier, and think about their future, and what could make them more healthier and make them want to do more.

This diversificiation could be achieved through more outreach, according to another coalition member. Specifically, according to one coalition member, this should be focused on the Black community in Stewart county:

And that, I don't know how to put it, but yes, we have to ... Yeah, I reach out to a lot of them. And I know that some of the other community members, people in the community that knows blacks, they will get out and talk to them and we get a lot there. We don't often get everybody to participate in different things. We kind of get different people in different organizations, you've got to pull them in closer together, and work better together.

Three coalition members hoped HTS would continue **bringing the community together**. One coalition member visioned,

Well, the main story I have, I would like to tell, is that it was a success and we're bringing in more people here that are more interested in what's going on in the community, and more healthier people in the community. That so that, everyone will know that their thing, that they could do to help out

themselves and others. Well, it came down to, what we could do working together and get things done, hopefully.

Another coalition member hoped that “[HTS] is making more people interested in what’s going on [and] it’s bringing people closer.”

Three coalition members hoped to **create a healthier community**, through changing eating habits and expanding the gardens. One coalition members hoped to:

Give them something to do that will benefit them, and to help make them more healthy, I hope, that we can get [some kind of] program that could furnish more healthier meals with our ideas and stuff. I think that will be a great asset for the community.

Another coalition member explained the need for expanded gardens:

I want [the garden] to grow. Four is not enough to support even seven very active people. Now we're going to have eight, we've added four more, now we've got eight. So now we can at least have eight of a summer crop, which will be fantastic. But we'd like to have eight of a winter crop and then have some more already ready for that summer crop.

Recommendations

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

1. Continue working on the desired goals of the community. There are a few projects that were delayed due to COVID-19 and project momentum has suffered, delaying the already slow process of systematic change. This includes implementing the walking trail plans and signage, more additions to the park, and expanding community gardens.
2. Strategize how to further work with stores and create partnerships to increase the success of the GGCs.
 - a. Why do they not want to implement the GGCs?
 - b. What would make them more interested in putting GGCs in the stores?
3. Consider finding a way to link the community gardens to the larger food system of the county or communities they are in.
 - a. Can excess produce from a garden be sold at the GGCs?
 - b. Could any of these profits fund plants and soil for next season’s garden?
4. Based on the hesitancy of some community members taking garden produce if they had not volunteered, it is recommended that HTS more clearly advertise their process for distributing food into the community. These communication messages should include the following content:
 - a. Who is eligible to receive or take produce from the garden?
 - b. How can they access this produce?
 - c. What produce is available in the garden?
5. Expand beyond the current communication efforts to bring both new community leaders and younger community members to the coalition. 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 Stewart County.

6. 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 HTS.
 - i. 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.
 1. Who are the leaders with influence within this community? Not all influential people within the community are traditional or typical leaders.
 2. Finding these influencers will be crucial to attract younger members of the community to become involved with HTS.

Overall, HTS 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.