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## **Healthier Together Clay Annual Evaluation Report**

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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%. The grant was awarded in September 2018 and continues through September 2023. This evaluation of the program's progress will cover activities completed in Year 4, from September 2021 through September 2022, in Clay County, Georgia.

In order to gain local expertise and input, a Healthier Together Clay Coalition was formed with county leaders and stakeholders in Clay County. 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, sidewalk repairs, and refurbishing Jefferson Street Park.

An evaluation of the HTC project was initiated in May 2022 to assess how the project was working, to determine whether HTC was achieving its intended goals, and to identify successes and opportunities for growth through an appreciative evaluation lens. The results presented here demonstrate the 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-funded 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 conducted a survey with community members and a focus group with coalition members in Clay County.

## Community Survey

Questions for the community survey asked participants where they purchased or consumed food, which HTC resources they used (including Grab-n-Go Coolers and walking trails), eating habits for themselves and their families, transportation habits, physical activity habits, and demographic questions. Community surveys were disseminated in Clay County by project staff members in popular locations. Surveys were distributed at the Clay County Extension Office, the Clay County Commissioners office, Fort Gaines City Hall, Clay County Library, and Cricket Drugs. A total of 37 responses were collected in Clay County during July 2022. Participating community members were asked to self-identify their demographic characteristics, presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Demographics of Community Member Survey Respondents (N = 37)*

Demographic		F	%
Gender	Female	22	59.6
	Male	11	29.7
Ethnicity/Race	Black/African American	19	51.4
	White/Non-Hispanic	13	35.1
	American Indian/Alaskan Native	1	2.7
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0.0
	Hispanic/Latino	0	0.0

Age	Other	0	0.0
	56-64	8	21.6
	26-35	6	16.2
	18-25	4	10.8
	65 and older	4	10.8
	36-45	1	8.1
	46-55	1	2.7
	No response	11	29.7
Marital Status	Single	14	37.8
	Married	12	32.4
	Divorced	5	13.5
	No response	4	10.8
	Widowed	1	2.7
	Separated	1	2.7
Children under 18 Living in Home	0	16	43.2
	1	6	16.2
	2	5	13.5
	3	4	10.8
	4	1	2.7
	Other	0	0.0
Level of Education	High School/ GED	16	43.2
	Some college	6	16.2
	Graduate Degree	4	10.8
	Less than high school	3	13.6
	Associate's Degree	2	5.4
	Bachelor's Degree	2	5.4
	No response	4	10.8
SNAP Benefits in Home	No	22	59.5
	Yes	11	29.7
	No response	4	10.8
WIC Benefits in Home	No	26	70.3
	Yes	7	18.9
	No response	4	10.8
Employment Status	Full-time	13	35.1
	Retired	8	21.6
	Unemployed, looking for work	4	10.8
	Part-time	3	8.1
	Unemployed, not looking for work	2	5.4
	Student	1	2.7
	Self-employed	1	2.7

## Focus Group

The HTC focus group and listening session occurred on July 7, 2022. The team developed a moderator guide designed 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. The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed. One member of the evaluation team then analyzed the transcripts for patterns in the interview transcript data, or dominant themes, looking for common ideas in the responses. To ensure the trustworthiness of the results, themes and direct quotations were used to develop a codebook as part of an audit trail and analyzed by an evaluation team member who had not conducted the focus group. This report describes the major themes emerging from the focus group data obtained in partnership with HTC coalition members in 2021-2022.

## Results

### Survey Results

During 2022, the Healthier Together staff distributed community surveys throughout Clay County. Results from the surveys are presented below.

#### Food Access and Nutrition

Community members were asked to describe how they accessed food in the community and their perceptions of their eating habits over the past year. Table 2 depicts where community members in Clay County get food.

Table 2

*Locations where Respondents' Get Food in Clay County (N = 37)*

<b>Food Retail Locations</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>%</b>
Grocery store (inside county)	23	62.2
Grocery store (outside county)	21	56.8
Dollar Stores	13	35.1
Gas Stations/Convenience Stores	10	27
Food Bank/Pantry	10	27
Sit down/Full-service Restaurant	7	18.9
Home Garden	5	13.5
Online Stores	4	10.8
Church/Community Organization	4	10.8
Farmers Market	4	10.8
Senior Meal Site	2	5.4
Other	2	5.4
CSA Program	1	2.7
Community Garden	1	2.7

When asked how often they used the Grab-n-Go cooler at Rubo's Grocery in the past year, only 12 respondents (32.4%) indicated they had used the cooler.

Respondents were also asked to describe their eating habits over the past year. 20 (54.1%) said they eat healthier food than they did last year, 13 (35.1%) said they eat the same kind of food as they did last year, and three (8.1%) said they eat less healthy food than they did last year.

When asked the same question about their family's eating habits over the past year, 16 (43.2%) said their family ate healthier food than they did last year, 16 (43.2%) said their family eats the same kind of food as they did last year, and

three (8.1%) said their family eats less healthy food than they did last year. Table 3 provides respondents' self-reported and family eating habits over the past year.

Table 3

*Respondents' Self-Reported and Family Eating Habits over the Last Year (N = 37)*

Eating Habits	Self-Report		Family	
	f	%	f	%
Eats healthier food than last year	20	54.1	16	43.2
Eats the same	13	35.1	16	43.2
No response	3	8.1	3	8.1
Eats less healthy	1	2.7	2	5.4

### Physical Activity

Community members were asked to describe their transportation and physical activity habits over the past year. Table 4 depicts how community members in Clay County use transportation.

Table 4

*Form of Transportation for Respondents in Clay County (N = 37)*

Form of Transportation	F	%
Drive Self	25	67.5
Driven by someone else	7	18.9
Walk	7	18.9
Taxi/Uber/Lyft	1	2.7
Bicycle	0	0.0
Other	0	0.0

When asked which walking trails they had used over the past year, 22 respondents (59.4%) said they used the Frontier Village Walking Trail and six respondents (16.2%) said they used the New Cemetery Park Walking Trail.

Respondents were asked to describe their physical activity habits over the past year. Activities could include walking, riding bicycles, gardening, or going to the gym, among others. 17 (45.9%) said they were more physically active than they were last year, 12 (32.4%) said they did the same amount of physical activity they did last year, and 6 (16.2%) said they were less physically active than they were last year. 2 respondents (5.4%) did not provide a response.

When asked the same question about their family, 14 (37.8%) said their family was more physically active than they were last year, 16 (43.2%) said their family did the same amount of physical activity as they did last year, and three (8.1%) said their family was less physically active than they were last year. Four respondents (10.8%) did not provide a response. Table 5 provides respondents' self-reported and family physical activity habits over the past year.

Table 5

*Respondents' Self-Reported and Family Physical Activity Habits over the Last Year (N = 37)*

Physical Activity Habits	Self-Report		Family	
	f	%	f	%
More physically active than last year	17	45.9	14	37.8

Same amount of physical activity	12	32.4	16	43.2
Less physical activity	6	16.2	3	8.1
No response	2	5.4	4	10.8

### HT Participation

Community members were asked whether they had heard of the Healthier Together program. 13 respondents (41.9%) said they had heard of HT before. 16 respondents (51.6%) said they had not heard of HT before. Two respondents (6.5%) were unsure. Table 6 presents how those who responded yes had heard of Healthier Together.

Table 6

*Modes of Learning about Healthier Together Clay (N = 37)*

Methods	F	%
Word of mouth	8	21.6
Newspaper	5	13.5
This survey	4	10.8
Social Media	3	8.1
Extension	3	8.1
Family Connections	2	5.4
Healthier Together website	0	0.0
Flyer	0	0.0
Grab-n-Go Cooler at Rubo's	0	0.0
Other	0	0.0

Community members were also asked whether they consider themselves a member of the Healthier Together Clay Coalition. 13 respondents (41.9%) said they do consider themselves a part of the coalition. Nine respondents (29.0%) said they do not consider themselves part of the coalition. Eight respondents (25.8%) were unsure.

### HT Interventions

Community members were asked if any of the HTC project food resources helped them eat healthier over the past year. 11 respondents (35.5%) reported that the Grab-n-Go Cooler at Rubo's helped them eat healthier. Regarding physical activity, seven respondents (22.6%) reported that the New Cemetery Park Walking Trail helped them engage in more physical activity, while 15 respondents (48.4%) reported that the Frontier Village Walking Trail helped them engage in more physical activity.

## Focus Group Results

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

### Food Access

The current food retail system within Clay County includes one grocery store and several gas stations which limits access to healthy food. HTC coalition members reported starting projects to improve the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables in the county. Project impact included **increased access to healthier food**; however, the affordability of that food remains a barrier.



### Grab-n-Go Cooler

The main project to improve food access in Clay County was the establishment of a **Grab-n-Go Cooler (GGC) in Rubo's Grocery Store**. The cooler was used to hold ready-to-eat healthy meals and snacks prepared at the store. This cooler was maintained in Y4.

### Collaboration with Food Pantry and Senior Center

Additional food access projects included providing a refrigeration unit and freezer to a local food pantry in the community. The coalition also provided recipe handouts for members of the senior center in town. These recipe cards were handed out with monthly meal boxes. In Y4, food pantry partnerships were maintained with the **Clay County Health Partnership** and a new partnership was established with the **Little Free Pantry Program**.

### Physical Activity

The availability of exercise opportunities in Clay County was fairly limited prior to the establishment of HTC. To encourage community members to engage in physical activity, the HTC coalition focused on repairing sidewalks in the town and refurbishing Jefferson Street Park. Accessibility to safe walking spaces were established through the **Historic Frontier Village** and the **Phenomenon Trail**. **Walkability signs** were created for Fort Gaines to encourage walking to and from everyday locations; however, at the time of the focus groups, the signs had not been mounted.

## 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. Some successes described by focus group participants included how HTC work **improved the safety of walking around town** through the sidewalk repairs. Additionally, **renovations to the Jefferson Street Park** in Y3 were enjoyed by the community in Y4.

Other coalition members described positive community reception and acceptance of HTC activities: "I think it's been a great, positive impact, but it also has showed others what infrastructures and organizations can do together by listening to the voice of the people."

Overall accomplishments of HTC included:

- Increased local and external interest in making historical sites and knowledge more accessible
- Participation and engagement from older community members
- Utilization of fresh produce from gardens in the community
- Peer-to-peer learning through recipe sharing and healthy eating discussions
- Increased community engagement with HTC
- Increased access to healthy food

## Future Impact and Visioning

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

Several coalition members were interested in ensuring the **sustainability** of the project and its impact for cultural change:

It's a good introduction to help continue to use resources by finding other ways, other people, who might be interested, including one of your counties that you've been serving in another grant. So, it can continue. Because five, 10 years is not enough. Two, five year grants aren't enough. It's going to take 30 years to see the

difference. And so, I think it's up to the people that bring the grants here to try to help find other sources of money.

The sustainability of the project also connected with having “**more readily available, fresh produce...** [because] let’s face it, those two little gardens can’t feed this whole town.” While the community gardens in Clay County are not CDC-funded, there are opportunities for collaborative partnerships between existing gardens, food pantries, and grab-n-go coolers to leverage project sustainability. Coalition members also wanted their program to be **adopted and adapted by other communities**.

Another coalition member hoped the community would be **more engaged with HTC**: “if you don’t have the whole community behind you, you’re not going to get it... So I see even more people engagement three years from now.” One way to achieve this was to use community events as an opportunity to educate about healthier food:

To get people to come to an event, you have to have food. It's just best to have food to get them. So, in introducing the food items, there's opportunity to introduce alternatives. In my church that I attend on Sundays, there's typically the kitchen is open and you can go by and get something to eat before you go home. The idea there for most congregations that do that, or for any event where there is food available, is to introduce those alternatives to get the people who are preparing the meals to consider alternatives in their offerings.

The participating coalition members expressed hope that HTC could **increase knowledge around nutritional choices**, as well as healthy, affordable recipes. Suggestions included, “putting together healthy meal [alternatives],” “recipes that use common household ingredients,” and “online [resources] for the options of what you can make out of [garden produce].”

Additionally, participating coalition members wanted **to increase healthy opportunities for older community members**, through food access and physical activity. One coalition member stated,

Older generations here, a lot of them will, you know, there was a lot to do and there was a lot of activities going on when they were younger. And then as the town kind of declined as they got older, they kind of got used to not having anything to do and not really doing anything, and just sit at home watching TV and just as you get older, the more and more you do it, the more and more you're going to keep doing it.

## Recommendations

Based on survey and focus group results, along with specific suggestions from HTC coalition members regarding next steps for the project, the evaluation team has provided several recommendations for the HTC sustainability of the project moving forward.

1. Coordinate communication efforts to increase community engagement, utilization, and volunteering.
  - a. Provide harvest signage so community members know when crops can be picked and the lifecycle of the plant.
  - b. Coordinate watering and planting efforts to reduce redundant activities.
  - c. Use community events as an opportunity to educate and advertise HTC initiatives.
  - d. Increase communication to the public in Clay County. Share progress and updates regularly with visuals to garner interest in the availability of new physical spaces and food access points to residents of Clay County.

- e. Ensure internal communications are clear within the coalition to ensure all coalition members are sharing a consistent message.
  - f. Develop educational programs with the garden and 4-H to increase intergenerational knowledge about agriculture and fresh produce.
  - g. Connect HTC activities and initiatives with interest in local historical efforts, like a “History Walk” in the county that could encourage more physical activity.
  - h. Elect an HTC “Youth Ambassador” to connect HTC efforts with 4-H and other school programs.
2. Finding alternative funding sources and partnerships to enhance the sustainability of project momentum and impact.
- a. Several coalition members wanted to establish farmer’s markets in the communities where people can sell farm surplus.
3. Recruitment efforts should focus on building partnerships and relationships with other leaders from non-involved communities within the county. Emphasizing recruitment could encourage involvement from groups within the community that have not yet engaged in HTC.
- a. Representation on the HTC is key to non-involved community members’ buy-in. To increase non-involved membership, especially with younger community members, it is important to determine who the influential leaders are within these groups and reach out to them directly.
  - b. Consider conducting a visioning session where the HTC can explore a few questions:
    - i. Who are the leaders with influence within this community?
    - ii. Not all influential people within the community are traditional or typical leaders. Who are the leaders we aren’t thinking of and how do we find them?

Overall, HTC has had a positive impact on the community but there is room to grow and emphasize the amazing changes occurring as a result of the hard work. Recommendations included capitalizing on the current progress made by the coalition to expand the reach and activities being done in the communities. Building on the momentum established in Y4 is the key to the long-term sustainability and success of HTC beyond the end of the project timeline.