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

Katie Dobbins, Hannah Southall, Dr. Alexa Lamm, & Dr. Ali Berg

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## About the Authors

**Katie Dobbins, M.S.** – Doctoral Research Assistant in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.

**Hannah Southall, MPH** – Project Manager, College of Public Health.

**Alexa Lamm, Ph.D.** – Associate Professor in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.

**Ali Berg, Ph.D.** – Associate Professor & Extension Nutrition and Health Specialist in the Department of Foods and Nutrition, College of Family and Consumer Sciences

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

**Rachel Hubbard** – Program Development Coordinator, FACS, University of Georgia Extension Southwest District

**Jeremy Register** – ANR County Extension Coordinator, University of Georgia Dooly County Extension

**Quadarius Hardy** – 4-H County Extension Educator, University of Georgia Dooly County Extension

**Ellen Farmer** – Graduate Student in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication

**Catherine Jones** – Graduate Student in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication

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## Background

Healthier Together Dooly (HTD) 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 Dooly Coalition was formed with county leaders and stakeholders. Project staff and coalition members worked together to establish impactful projects that were appropriate for Dooly County communities. These projects included Grab-n-Go Coolers, wayfinding signs, and plans for other projects within the county, such as community gardens and improvements to the local recreation center's track and field.

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

## Methods

One of the evaluation goals was to gain an understanding of the direct and indirect community impacts of the HTD 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 seven coalition members in Dooly county for whom the evaluation team had contact information, interviews were conducted with five 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 HTD 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 Dooly County includes three grocery stores, four dollar stores, and several gas stations. One coalition member described the kinds of food readily available in the towns of Dooly County:

Except in Pinehurst, there's a Dollar General on every corner. And how you don't see a lot of nutritious food in those kinds of places, you see chips and Coke. And they have some nutritious foods, but it's not as prevalent as the junk food.

With this limited access to healthy food in mind, HTD coalition members started projects to improve the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables in the county.

### *Grab and Go Coolers*

The first food access project started by HTD was the establishment of a Grab-and-Go Cooler (GGC). Multiple coalition members stated that they had heard people were buying healthy items from the GGC. One coalition member described trying different items within the cooler to find the preferences of the community:

When we start[ed] putting all those subs and salads and all that, nobody want to touch it, eventually it grew up. Like with that probiotic juice, when we put that and fruit tray - it came with the fruit, one packet of cracker, one small grapes, some cheese and apple together, people love that thing.... People are happy anyway because [of] the salad thing and the sub thing, because they love that food.... they're thinking healthier. There are a lot of people they are healthier.

According to coalition members, the GGC has been well-received by the community, though it took time and expense on the part of the store's owner to discover what kinds of healthy food items were preferred by their customers.

### *Gardens*

Community gardens are still in development in Dooly County. There are two gardens planned for the community, both located at county schools. The construction of these gardens has been postponed due to COVID-19 and the subsequent trend towards online learning. Coalition members are still excited about the garden plans. The goal of these gardens is to teach the students, "how to grow their own food and that kind of thing. And then actually use that at the school lunch room."

Coalition members hope to continue making progress on improving food access in the year to come.

### Physical Activity

The availability of exercise opportunities in Dooly County is fairly limited. There are some sidewalks in the larger towns, but they do not have ramps to facilitate wheelchairs, strollers, and bicycles. There is a recreation center at the old Vienna elementary school, which consists of a non-air-conditioned gym and a track surrounding a pop-up soccer field. The HTD coalition has a few projects to facilitate improving physical activity and exercise in the county, including wayfinding signs, plans for improving the track, and plans for outdoor exercise equipment.

### **Wayfinding Signs**

The HTD coalition was in the process of completing walk audits of Vienna at the time of the interviews. The purpose of these walk audits was to find easy routes between common destinations, time how long it took to walk those routes, and create and post signs that direct people on these routes. According to one coalition member, “We have been working on mapping out some walking trails, and having signage along the trails saying, so many miles to Piggly Wiggly, or so many miles to the Dollar General Store, those kinds of things.” Unfortunately, the posting of those signs was delayed due to COVID-19 closing the local government for a period of time: “We have gotten the signage, but then we haven't been able to get it put up, because we got it about the time everything's sort of shut down.”

### **Track Improvements**

The Dooly County Recreation Department is housed on the campus of the old elementary school. The walking track there is often used by locals to walk and to play pick-up soccer games on evenings and the weekends. One coalition member noted that they have seen teenagers “with cones and they're working out, doing speed and agility drills ... a lot of them come out to our track field or football field and get a little exercise because they can't do it anywhere else.” Coalition members described their hopes for that destination: “I really would like to repave that track, that would be an excellent project. I mean, that would be something that would be good for our community, because so many people use that track.” Another coalition member wished for shade trees and outdoor exercise equipment to help improve the area.

### **Overall Impact**

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

One success described was how HTD has **brought the community together**. One coalition member explained that HTD has “brought an element of the community together.” This coalition member described how,

[Another] thing is bringing everybody to the table to discuss what we need, because I might not think about what somebody in the other part of the County needs. And we've had a lot of discussion about how it impacts our elderly, shut ins and so forth, and getting good, healthy food choices to them. There's been a bit of a discussion on that.

Additionally, another coalition member stated HTD **increased awareness of healthy choices** within the community:

I think a lot of part of it is awareness. A lot of times that's what most people need is awareness, information and communication. That's a big part of it, is just making people aware of things that they should be doing and not doing, and things that they're doing that they should not be doing.

A different coalition member echoed this awareness by expressing how HTD,

Has really called attention to our need for some improvements in healthier living areas. It really has. [...] I think it's played a major role in just bringing it to our attention [...] It's opened my eyes to the needs that we have, and I think we're going to address these, and it's going to improve the quality of life here for our people.

One coalition member described the **improved health and increased access to healthy foods** they observed in the community – “I think people are getting healthier, and I think the effort done by the program should be done in more locations too.” One coalition member extended this by explaining how “I think we have more options now than we did, more options of healthier foods than we have in the past.”

Another aspect of improved health was seeing **increased motivation for physical activity**. One coalition member explained, “the benefit[s] of getting adults more exercise than just the kids because we don't do a lot of adult things. Mostly, [...] with working with this, I think we could get more adults involved in things.”

Three coalition members described the **community acceptance** of changes implemented by HTD. One coalition member explained, “I think that the community is excited about what they've helped us with funding and things like that.” Another coalition member stated,

Well, I think they've been accepted well. Yeah, you've always got those that are like, "Meh." But, the majority of the people I think have really accepted it well. Most people really loved the idea of the sidewalk and trails and the signage on them. Even though we haven't got it up yet, the talk about it has been good.

A third coalition member felt that community acceptance was “not at 100% right now, but I can tell you that it's coming. People are thinking, I can see that. It's not going to go from zero to 100 in one year or six months.”

Even though coalition members described community acceptance, four coalition members expressed that there has been **slow progress** within the community. One coalition member said there have not been “a lot of changes,” as the project is still in its infancy. Another stated, “I would have liked to have seen us get more done, but I understand it's a long-term thing. You have to start one step at a time.” Additionally, one coalition member explained how some HTD coalition members were confused about funding restrictions:

One of the things that we were, I was never sure about, and I don't know if they were either in the beginning is that this was supposed to be a thing that was funded over several years and we didn't... and it was supposed to be so much per year. And we didn't understand if the funds that you were going to get for the first year, if you were not able to use them within that first year would that mean you'd lose those funds or would that carry over to the next year? That was just one of the questions I remember we all had about it.

However, despite some slow progress and setbacks, the HTD coalition had successes. One coalition member expressed, “it's really going to impact the community.” Another coalition member stated, “it gives hope for our community to continue moving forward and to continue offering healthy choices to people so that they can live more fulfilling lives.”

## 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. Six themes emerged from these questions: healthier community, increased access to healthy foods, more exercise opportunities, increased communication, and continuity and sustainability of project.

First, four coalition members hoped for a **healthier community**. Comments included, “I would like to say we're healthier” and that “the community [...] is getting more involved in this kind of food and program.” One coalition

member expressed their hope that looking back on the project, “over the last three years we [will have] tried to make it more healthy, and healthier environment for all ages.”

Three coalition members envisioned **increased access to healthy foods** as part of future goals for HTD. One coalition member hoped “to see us having access to fresh fruits and vegetables, locally grown, easy access to them.” This increased healthy food access was described as more community gardens and possibly a farmers’ market:

I know you can go to some of the stores and buy them, but it would be nice to have a farmer's market where people could come in and get the locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables. I'd like to see that, I really would.

Two coalition members expressed a desire for **more exercise opportunities**. This included revitalizing playground equipment at the school, repairing the school track, and installing walking signs to encourage people to walk more in the community. These plans were referenced earlier in the physical activity results.

Another theme that emerged from two coalition members was the need to **increase communication** and further educate the community. One specific recommendation was to create signage for the GGCs explaining different reasons to choose nutritious foods, and why these foods are beneficial. Additional suggestions included advertising HTD through inserts in the local paper or on various social media sites to reach younger people. One coalition member explained, “I think more information needs to be put out [...] We can put out fliers, send out emails, and stuff like that.”

Four coalition members made suggestions for the **continuity and sustainability** of the project. One coalition member emphasized the need to “continue to meet and come up with specific plans for the different goals that we have.” Another coalition member stated that HTD needed to,

Get more people involved as well, because I know that was something that I felt like we struggled with for us to be such a big County and to have several cities with council members and other people that... like business owners or church leaders or different things like that, that could become involved as part of all this, it was just hard to get a lot of people interested. I think that would probably help a lot to involve more community resource people.

Two coalition members stressed the importance of finances for the project. One coalition member stated they just needed to “get the money approved and go forward with the project.” Another coalition member said, “I don’t know how long the [CDC] is supporting the program, but I hope they keep doing it.”



## Recommendations

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

1. Continue working on the desired goals of the community, such as school gardens and repairs/improvements to the Rec Center's track and field, and walking signage throughout the community. Many of these goals are large, but attainable within the grant's parameters and the county resources. However, project momentum has suffered due to COVID-19, delaying the already slow process of systematic change. HTD should continue with plans to implement walking signage throughout the community.
2. Consider providing more aid to store owners for setting up their Grab-and-Go Coolers. Help with the cost of healthy foods while owners try to figure out which items are appropriate for their customers may increase likelihood of success.
3. 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 Dooly County.
4. 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 HTD.
  - 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 HTD.
5. HTD 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.

Overall, HTD 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 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.