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Healthier Together Calhoun Annual Evaluation Report

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Background

Healthier Together Calhoun (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 3, from September 2020 through September 2021, in Calhoun County, Georgia.

In order to gain local expertise and input, a Healthier Together Calhoun Coalition was formed with county leaders and stakeholders in Calhoun County. Project staff and coalition members worked together to establish impactful projects that were appropriate for Calhoun County communities. These projects included a Grab-n-Go Cooler, community gardens, partnerships with local food pantries and Faithful Families, walking trails, and walking signage.

An evaluation of the HTC project was initiated in April 2021 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. Despite setbacks from COVID-19, the results presented here demonstrate the 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 conducted a survey with community members and a focus group with coalition members in Calhoun 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 various demographic questions. The community survey was disseminated in Calhoun County by project staff members in popular locations. A total of 110 surveys were collected, with 106 paper surveys returned and four online surveys submitted. Participating community members were asked to self-identify their demographic characteristics, presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographics of Community Member Survey Respondents (N = 110)

Demographic		F	%
Gender	Female	81	73.6
	Male	27	24.5
	Prefer not to say	1	0.9
	No response	1	0.9
Ethnicity/Race	Black/ African American	56	50.9
	White, Non-Hispanic	40	36.4
	Hispanic/Latino	6	5.5
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0.0
	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	0	0.0
Age	18-24	12	10.9

	25-34	14	12.7
	35-44	29	26.5
	45-54	21	19.1
	55-64	18	16.4
	65 or older	16	14.5
Marital Status	Single	55	50
	Married	27	24.5
	Living with a partner/ Not married	10	9.1
	Divorced	9	8.2
	Widowed	8	7.3
	No response	1	0.9
Number of Children under 18 Living in Home	0	57	51.8
	1	16	14.5
	2	22	20.0
	3	9	8.2
	4	4	3.6
	5 or more	2	1.8
Level of Education	High School/ GED	28	25.5
	Some college	28	25.5
	Associate's Degree	13	11.8
	Bachelor's Degree	13	11.8
	Less than high school	9	8.2
	Graduate Degree (Masters, Doctorate)	9	8.2
	Student	6	5.5
	No response	4	3.6
SNAP Benefits in Home	Yes	42	38.2
	No	67	60.9
	No response	1	0.9
WIC Benefits in Home	Yes	16	14.5
	No	92	83.6
	No response	2	1.8
Employment Status	Full-time	46	41.8
	Retired	24	21.8
	Part-time	17	15.5
	Self-employed	12	10.9
	Unemployed, not looking for work	5	4.5
	Unemployed, looking for work	3	2.7
	No response	3	2.7

Focus Group

Due to COVID-19 and social distancing requirements, the focus group with Calhoun County occurred virtually over Zoom. 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.

Results

Survey Results

During 2021, the Healthier Together staff distributed community surveys throughout Calhoun 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 Calhoun County get food.

Table 2
Locations where Respondents’ Get Food in Calhoun County (N = 110)

Food Access Location	F	%
Grocery Store (Inside County)	91	82.7
Grocery Store (Outside County)	87	79.1
Full-Service Restaurant	59	53.6
Dollar Stores	55	50.0
Food Bank/Pantry	33	30.0
Online Stores	25	22.7
Gas Stations/Convenience Stores	25	22.7
Home Garden	17	15.5
Community Garden	13	11.8
Church/Community Organization	12	10.9
Farmers' Market	7	6.4
Senior Meal Site	3	2.7
Other	2	1.8
Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)	0	0

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they used HTC project food resources over the past year. Table 3 presents the frequencies and percentages of respondents’ use.

Table 3
Respondents' Use of HTC Food Resources in County

Project Food Resource	<i>f</i>	%
Grab-and-Go Cooler – Jerry’s Meat Market	36	32.7
Grab-and-Go Cooler – Sweet GA Brown’s	19	17.3
Grab-and-Go Cooler – West IGA	47	42.7
Grab-and-Go Cooler – Calhoun County Extension Office	10	9.1
Grab-and-Go Cooler – Red’s BBQ	23	20.9
Mr. Floyd's Garden	15	13.6
Leary Community Garden	2	1.8
County Extension Garden in Morgan	14	12.7
Commissioner's Office Garden in Morgan	11	10.0
Head Start Garden	4	3.6

Respondents were also asked to describe their eating habits over the past year. A total of 48 (43.6%) said they eat healthier food than they did last year, 56 (50.9%) said they eat the same kind of food as they did last year, and five respondents (4.5%) 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, 42 (38.2%) said their family ate healthier food than they did last year, 58 (52.7%) said their family eats the same kind of food as they did last year, and six respondents (5.5%) said their family eats less healthy food than they did last year.

Physical Activity

There are several physical activity interventions in Calhoun County. Four walking trails were implemented in the county: Arlington Walking Trail, Morgan Walking Trail, Edison Walking Trail, and Leary Walking Trail. There are also signs in Arlington, Morgan, Edison, and Leary that tell residents how long it takes to walk between specified destinations. When asked which walking trails they had used over the past year, 24 respondents (21.8%) said they used the Arlington Walking Trail, 26 (23.6%) said they used the Morgan Walking Trail, 29 (26.4%) said they used the Edison Walking Trail, and 15 respondents (13.6%) said they used the Leary Walking Trail. When asked which walking signage they used in the past year, 16 (14.5%) said they used the signs in Arlington, 19 (17.3%) said they used the signs in Morgan, 20 (18.2%) said they used the signs in Edison, and 16 (14.5%) said they used the signs in Leary.

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. A total of 38 respondents (34.5%) said they were more physically active than they were last year, 58 (52.7%) said they did the same amount of physical activity they did last year, and 13 respondents (11.8%) said they were less physically active than they were last year. One respondent (0.9%) did not provide a response.

When asked the same question about their family, 28 respondents (25.5%) said their family was more physically active than they were last year, 60 (54.5%) said their family did the same amount of physical activity as they did last year, and 18 respondents (16.4%) said their family was less physically active than they were last year. Four respondents (3.6%) did not provide a response.

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

Table 4
Form of Transportation for Respondents in Calhoun County (N = 110)

Form of Transportation	F	%
Drive Self	92	83.6
Walk	34	30.9
Driven by Someone Else	23	20.9
Bicycle	8	7.3
Taxi/Uber/Lyft	0	0.0

Focus Group Results

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

Food Access

HTC has increased food access in the community through the implementation and maintenance of community gardens and Grab-n-Go Coolers to increase healthy food retail options. HTC has partnered with several food banks/pantries as well as Faithful Families to increase the distribution of healthier food options to the community.

Community Gardens

There are currently six community gardens established in Stewart County: **Mr. Floyd’s Garden**, the **Leary Community Garden**, the **Calhoun County Extension Garden** in Morgan, the **Commissioners’ Office Community Garden** in Morgan, the **Head Start Garden**, and, though not listed in the community survey, the **Busy Bee Daycare Garden**. The community gardens were well-received by community members. Participating coalition members explained the high use of the gardens and how they have increased access to fresh produce in the community. One coalition member described the gardens as a major asset to the community:

I know that the garden we have here is just a tremendous garden. It's a beautiful garden that Mr. Mitchell has which is across the street. I pass it every day. People do get produce from there. In a rural area, sometimes you don't have the freshest but that is out of the garden. It is beautiful. I think that's one of the things, one asset that we have gotten from this program is having community gardens in the area.

One coalition member explained how the garden at the day care enhanced her children’s education and well-being:

My youngest [child] goes to day care here, in Arlington. I know the coalition provided them with a garden as well. They use those fruits and vegetables or whatever they grow. The day care provider... Once the kids were in that garden with her or whatever and then they used the fruits and vegetables to eat as part of their meals.

Grab-n-Go Cooler

Another food access initiative by HTC was the establishment of a Grab-n-Go Cooler (GGC) in every city in Calhoun County. The coolers contained ready-to-eat healthy meals. Participating coalition members explained the high use of and demand for items in the GGCs: “I know that you can't go in the grocery store in Edison during lunch and you're not seeing people using the Grab-n-Go Coolers and getting their lunch out of there.”

HTC also provided a cooler to a local food pantry and food bank. The installation of the cooler helped increase the amount of nutrient-dense foods residents could receive at the food pantry:

I would like to add that our church has a pantry. We had been storing and providing dry goods for those in need. Several months ago the coalition provided us with the cooler. With that cooler we're now able to provide other goods rather than just the dry goods. We can provide milk, vegetables that have to be

refrigerated, and other things like that other than just the dry goods, so because of the coalition we can offer a wide variety of foods to those in need.

The cities of Edison and Arlington have a food bank that helps supply food to residents. HTC was also able to help provide them with a cooler:

The community in Edison and the community here in Arlington get the food from the food bank. They utilize that. A lot of people get vegetables and stuff that probably some of them can't even afford. That has helped. Just by having somewhere to store it later is a good thing for our community by having the coolers.

Overall, the food access initiatives greatly increased food access options across the county and participating coalition members described a high level of community satisfaction with both the gardens and the GGCs.

Physical Activity

To encourage community members to engage in physical activity, the HTC coalition provided many exercise resources across the county. These projects included **walking signage** in all four cities (Arlington, Edison, Leary, and Morgan) describing the distances between everyday locations in town to encourage more walking in the community. HTC also provided **playground equipment** and **workout stations** at local parks. **Sidewalk repairs** completed by HTC were a great asset to the community, in addition to the walking signage:

I often see the judge walk the sidewalks now that they've been repaired maybe three times a day Monday through Friday. Just actually seeing people walk the new sidewalks. I've been seeing the signage of it's only four laps and it's a whole mile if you walk this walking trail. It's just like a mind over matter thing, and they've been doing it.

HTC also created four **walking trails**, one in each city in Calhoun County. These were used frequently by the community, as described by one coalition member: "I don't think I go by those walking trails without seeing at least one person on them."

The availability of exercise opportunities in Calhoun County was fairly limited prior to HTC. One coalition member explained the impact of HTC on physical activity opportunities: "we don't have gyms and stuff like that. The closest gym is probably 30 minutes away from here. Having access to things where people can workout or walk. That's an awesome, awesome thing." Coalition members described high use of the physical activity resources installed by HTC, estimating around 15 people using the outdoor equipment at any given time.

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 Calhoun County. One coalition member described the **increased exercise in the community**, specifically from walking signage, trails, sidewalk repairs, and the exercise equipment provided by HTC. This coalition member observed,

I think by having it we all now have something we can go to daily as far as the walking trail. Just like everybody is saying, now that you don't have to leave your child with someone to go and walk around the track. There is somewhere for them to play while you are walking around the track. It gets you more physical and you can exercise more. Here in Arlington, we have the outside basketball court then we have the playground equipment then we have the walking trail all together. A family can go down there together and spend some quality time. I think that having all that together it brings the family together better.

The unintended impact of providing a space where families can spend quality time while engaging in physical activity was an additional positive asset for the community by HTC.

Other HTC members described how HTC facilitated an **increased awareness of health** in the community. This included making people more health conscious about what they eat as well as highlighting the importance of taking care of one's body. A coalition member explained their perspective of HTC's impact:

I think a very big impact that the coalition has had also is it has made people more aware of what they eat. They're more health conscious... the coalition has made us stop and think about what we're putting into our bodies and how important it is to stay fit, to get out, move about and more around, get some exercise.

Other impacts included HTC partnering with Cooperative Extension to install a greenhouse and outdoor classroom for educational activities at the school. Participating coalition members described how HTC has had a **positive impact on youth**, and that there were significant numbers of younger people participating in HTC and its resources.

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.

All participating coalition members wanted **increased use of physical activity resources**. While coalition members felt there was a high degree of use for the physical activity resources, they wanted that use to be sustained, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. They wanted to build on the positive momentum already seen within the community: "That is my vision, that we as family be healthier together. That we will come back together closer because of the equipment and things now we can utilize."

Another coalition member expressed a **desire for better community health**. They stated, "I know our county is pretty high on the health rating list in terms of obesity and heart disease. It would be awesome to see those numbers drop."

Additionally, coalition members saw the benefits of the sidewalk repairs and expressed a **desire for sidewalk repairs in all Calhoun County cities**. This coalition member expressed how they were already looking for opportunities to get the repairs done in Leary:

I saw that one of the cities in the county has had their sidewalks repaired. Leary is in desperate need of the same thing. I think there's still some grants out there. Some people who don't go to the track, they like to walk on the sidewalks. Our sidewalks are uprooted by the tree roots and things like that. We're looking forward to getting a grant to improve our sidewalks.

The participating coalition members also expressed a desire for the **sustainability of the project**. One participant explained,

I would think with anything like this sustainability is very important. For this to keep ongoing for future generations and not just stop when this cycle is over, or Healthier Together ends for it to just go away. If we want real change we want it to last forever.

One of the ways they envisioned project sustainability was through **bringing in new people to continue the work**:

I would say one of the ways that we can move forward with a lot of things that we have going on that we try to bring some new people into it to continue it. No matter what, the more the number the better it will be. I think by us trying to get it across to more people and letting them know what we are trying to do for our community.

Overall, participating coalition members overwhelmingly expressed positive community impacts from HTC. Most visioning revolved around building upon the positive momentum already occurring. In the following section are a few recommendations on how to achieve these visions and continue this momentum.

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 project.

1. Seek funding or mini-grants for more sidewalk repairs in the county, so all cities can experience the positive impacts of having improved sidewalks.
2. Expand beyond the current communication efforts to bring new community leaders and younger community members to the coalition, aligning with the vision for sustaining the project.
 - a. Increase communication to the public in Caloun 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 Calhoun County.
 - b. Facebook is a great communication resource for HTC, so increasing communication messages through this channel would be an effective first step. Participating coalition members cited Facebook as a popular way to communicate with community members, so leveraging this communication channel is important.
 - c. Consider doing giveaways through Facebook to increase followership and engagement by community members on social media.
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 and contribute to the sustainability of the project.
 - 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. Build on current youth involvement in HTC to increase engagement.
 - 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?
4. Though HTC has many positive impacts, coalition members did say a lack of infrastructure was a serious barrier for the development of their community. Finding partnerships and funding that can target infrastructural developments may complement the positive work being done by HTC.
5. Advertise and recruit for community garden participation. There is a higher frequency of use of GGCs than community gardens, indicating a need for increased outreach.

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. This would not be possible without the successful work already implemented by the coalition. Building on the momentum established despite COVID-19 challenges is the key to sustainability and success over the long-term.