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Healthier Together Stewart Annual Evaluation Report

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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%. 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 Stewart County, Georgia.

In order to gain local expertise and input, a Healthier Together Stewart Coalition was formed with county leaders and stakeholders in Stewart County. Project staff and coalition members worked together to establish impactful projects that were appropriate for Stewart County communities. These projects included a Grab-n-Go Cooler, sidewalk repairs, and community gardens.

An evaluation of the HTS project was initiated in April 2021 to assess how the project was 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 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 conducted a survey with community members and a focus group with coalition members in Stewart County.

Community Survey

Questions for the community survey asked participants where they purchased or consumed food, which HTS 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 Stewart County by project staff members in popular locations. A total of 28 surveys were collected, with 25 paper surveys returned and three 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 = 28)

Demographic		F	%
Gender	Female	22	78.6
	Male	5	17.9
	No response	1	3.6
Ethnicity/Race	Black/ African American	17	60.7
	White, Non-Hispanic	10	35.7
	Hispanic/Latino	0	0.0
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0.0
	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	0	0.0
Age	18-24	1	3.6
	25-34	5	17.9
	35-44	4	14.3

	45-54	4	14.3
	55-64	7	25.0
	65 or older	6	21.4
	No response	1	3.6
Marital Status	Married	13	46.4
	Single	6	21.4
	Divorced	3	10.7
	Widowed	3	10.7
	Living with a partner/ Not married	2	7.1
	No response	1	3.6
Number of Children under 18 Living in Home	0	18	64.3
	1	3	10.7
	2	4	14.3
	3	1	3.6
	4	1	3.6
	5 or more	1	3.6
	No response	1	3.6
Level of Education	Less than high school	3	10.7
	High School/ GED	6	21.4
	Some college	7	25.0
	Associate's Degree	5	17.9
	Bachelor's Degree	5	17.9
	Graduate Degree (Masters, Doctorate)	1	3.6
	No response	1	3.6
SNAP Benefits in Home	Yes	3	10.7
	No	24	85.7
	No response	1	3.6
WIC Benefits in Home	Yes	6	21.4
	No	21	75.0
	No response	1	3.6
Employment Status	Full-time	11	39.3
	Part-time	4	14.3
	Retired	6	21.4
	Self-employed	1	3.6
	Unemployed, looking for work	1	3.6
	Unemployed, not looking for work	4	14.3
	No response	1	3.6

Focus Group

Due to COVID-19 and social distancing requirements, the focus group with Stewart 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 HTS coalition members in 2021.

Results

Survey Results

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

Table 2
Locations where Respondents' Get Food in Stewart County (N = 28)

Food Access Location	F	%
Grocery Store (Inside County)	11	39.3
Grocery Store (Outside County)	17	60.7
Dollar Stores	12	42.9
Full-Service Restaurant	3	10.7
Community Garden	2	7.1
Online Stores	2	7.1
Gas Stations/Convenience Stores	2	7.1
Food Bank/Pantry	1	3.6
Home Garden	1	3.6
Senior Meal Site	0	0.0
Farmers' Market	0	0.0
Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)	0	0.0
Church/Community Organization	0	0.0

Respondents were asked to indicate if they had used the Richland Community Garden in the past year, and 14 respondents (50.0%) said they had used it. When asked how often they used the Grab-n-Go cooler at the Lumpkin Courthouse in the past year, no respondents (0.0%) indicated they had used the cooler.

Respondents were also asked to describe their eating habits over the past year. Eleven (39.3%) said they eat healthier food than they did last year, 17 (60.7%) said they eat the same kind of food as they did last year, and no respondents (0.0%) 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, 12 (42.9%) said their family ate healthier food than they did last year, 16 (57.1%) said their family eats the same kind of food as they did last year, and no respondents (0.0%) said their family eats less healthy food than they did last year.

Physical Activity

There are three physical activity interventions in Stewart County: signs in Lumpkin indicating how far it takes to walk from one location to another, signs in Richland indicating how far it takes to walk from one location to another, and Lumpkin Park Walking Trail. When asked which they had used over the past year, five respondents (17.9%) said they used the signs in Lumpkin, four (14.3%) said they used the signs in Richland, and no respondents (0.0%) said they used the Lumpkin 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. Eleven (39.3%) said they were more physically active than they were last year, 17 (60.7%) said they did the same amount of physical activity they did last year, and no respondents (0.0%) said they were less physically active than they were last year.

When asked the same question about their family, nine respondents (32.1%) said their family was more physically active than they were last year, 18 (64.3%) said their family did the same amount of physical activity as they did last year, and no respondents (0.0%) said their family was less physically active than they were last year. One respondent (3.6%) did not provide a response.

Community members were asked to describe their transportation and physical activity habits over the past year. Table 3 depicts how community members in Stewart County use transportation.

Table 3
Form of Transportation for Respondents in Stewart County (N = 28)

Form of Transportation	F	%
Drive Self	23	82.1
Walk	12	42.9
Driven by Someone Else	4	14.3
Taxi/Uber/Lyft	0	0.0
Bicycle	0	0.0

Focus Group Results

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

Food Access

HTS currently hopes to increase food access in the community through the implementation and maintenance of community gardens and Grab-n-Go Coolers to increase healthy food retail options.

Community Gardens

There are currently two community gardens established in Stewart County: the **Richland Community Garden** and the **Lumpkin Teaching Garden**. These gardens had a good harvest in 2021, but coalition members reported several challenges. One challenge in particular was described as difficulty getting garden participation by community members. One coalition member described a decline in coalition membership: “I think we have lost a number of [coalition] members and I haven’t been able to figure out exactly what’s going on with all of them.” They also attributed a lack of participation due to burnout from other aspects of life, leaving limited time for volunteer activities. However, overall, the coalition members described the benefits of the community gardens and a building up of momentum in 2021:

I think the garden has gone through some ups and downs, but I think everybody who's participated has enjoyed it. There was some positive energy again. Last time when we all got together, we were excited. A lot of us had been vaccinated so there was a lower level of tension. We were able to work more closely

together and there was a less sort of fear factor in getting together and doing what we're doing. So there was a lot more joy involved than stress last year.

There are plans in place to develop a Lumpkin Community Garden and the another garden in Richland with other community partners during 2022.

Grab-n-Go Cooler

The main project to improve food access in Stewart County was the establishment of a Grab-n-Go Cooler (GGC) at **Lumpkin City Hall**. The cooler was used to hold ready-to-eat healthy meals and snacks prepared at the store. However, coalition members reported infrequent use of the GGC by general community members:

The coolers were designed so that we could expand access to fresh fruits and vegetables... The most common one was located at city hall. It was mostly people from the county that used it for healthier lunch options. There were salads and things that were prepared in there. So unless you're a frequent visitor of city hall, you may not have seen it. And that's one of the things that we can work towards. The ideal model would be that the community gardens would be connected to the coolers, but that's the main active one in this community.

However, there was a demand for options in the GGCs by those who frequently utilized the Lumpkin City Hall location:

It was an overwhelming amount that people were participating in it so much so that we're actually looking at relocating the cooler because it was basically one person maintaining it and trying to keep those. We didn't have a steady supply of things coming in to be served out of it so that one person was trying to maintain it, prepare the things and get them sent out.

Physical Activity

The availability of exercise opportunities in Stewart County was fairly limited. To encourage community members to engage in physical activity, the HTS coalition focused on providing walking signage describing the distances between everyday locations in town to encourage more walking in the community. Additionally, HTS also aimed to establish more walking trails in the community and will continue with these plans in 2022.

Walking Signage and Trail

A main physical activity project for HTS was putting up walking signage around the county. One participant explained, "we've done some work regarding pathways, and encouraging walkable paths and ways to get around towns, there's been signage put up to that effect."

Though HTS has established the Lumpkin Park Walking trail, few people reported using the trail. Participating coalition members also reported a lack of walking trails in the county rather than impacts from those currently installed. Thus, there is a need for increased advertisement to enhance the impact of this project intervention.

HTS is also looking to work with the City of Lumpkin to revamp a park off of Highway 27 for increased outdoor recreation opportunities. This park would also be connected with walking trails and be a location for additional walking signage.

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. One coalition member described the **increased exercise in the community**, specifically from walking signage placed by HTS. This coalition member observed,

We have a constant trickle of people that walk from residential neighborhoods that are on our east side, walking toward the main part of town. They may be going to some of the... business or they could be

walking to the grocery store. I'm not sure where they're headed, but that there's a steady trickle of people during the day that walks east and west behind our place.

Some plans for implementing walking trails were paused in 2021. This will be a focus of 2022 efforts for physical activity.

However, several HTS members described a **low level of overall community participation**. One participant explained how, "compared to the community size, it's still relatively small." However, for those that have participated, the coalition members feel there have been positive impacts.

Currently, HTS is attempting to partner with food banks and pantries to extend the distribution of produce from the community gardens in broader county-level food systems. Faithful Families is one partnership currently being pursued and remains a key focus for the project moving into year 5.

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 **more walking trails in town**. These walking trails would be connected to outdoor destinations, such as a park, where family members could take children to engage in physical activity without worrying about traffic from the highway. These would be walking trails leading to safe spaces for physical activity opportunities.

Another coalition member expressed a **need for awareness** in the community through the work of HTS. They stated, "Well, I think [we need] more awareness of just what the possibilities are for improving one's health and what opportunities are available in the community to do that. I mean they're not vast, but they're not insignificant either. And how we can increase awareness of what's available, I think will be a big help."

Coalition members also described various **communication challenges** and their needs for addressing this challenge. One participant explained,

There are some people that are interested in gardening and what we're doing, but it's limited. I think that, like I said before, I think getting signs up and so that a lot of people drive by and they'll wave. But, if we had a sign up that advertised what we're doing and how it works, I think people would be probably more curious because everybody always wants to be cautious about approaching people and being assuming that anything. So they're just advertising it in a way that's out there. I think would be helpful to get more and more people involved and just figure out how people that have shown interest, how we don't, how we can amplify that. Whether it's something they can take with them that explains what we're doing. A little flyer in a box or something. Somehow to capitalize on anything that increases awareness and interest would be a great thing.

The participating coalition members also expressed a desire for the **sustainability of the project**. One participant asked, "The question in my mind is: What happens after the grant's done? How will we keep the initiative and the momentum going? How do we transition from a system that's kind of like trying to take this inert object and give it life. It's like a Frankenstein kind of thing. Bolts are shining and we got the money flow. There are flickers of intelligence and activity now, but it's still got a ways to go before it's going to get up and start walking and running on its own."

Recommendations

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

1. Brainstorm alternative methods of increasing healthy food access in Stewart County.
 - a. Consider finding another location for the second GGC rather than keeping the location at city hall. Continue current plans to move the GGC to a retail space.
 - 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. A mobile market may be an alternative option.
 - c. Expand advertising of the GGC and community gardens to increase impact.
 - d. Supply GGCs with produce from the community gardens.
2. Consider providing information signage at the community gardens. One coalition member suggested having contact information of a garden lead so garden visitors know who to reach out to for questions.
 - a. This could also capture the existing community interest in the garden that could be capitalized on for community garden growth and outreach.
3. Advertise the Lumpkin Park Trail. Use outreach efforts or events to gather community members at the trail to promote its use.
4. Expand beyond the current communication efforts to bring new community leaders and younger community members to the coalition.
 - a. Increase communication to the public in Stewart 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 Stewart County.
 - b. Ensure internal communications are clear within the coalition and project staff to ensure all coalition members are sharing a consistent message.
 - c. Facebook is a great communication resource for HTS, so increasing communication messages through this channel would be an effective first step.
 - d. Consider doing giveaways through Facebook to increase followership and engagement by community members on social media.
 - e. Facilitate face-to-face communication efforts in the community to help regain some momentum lost after COVID-19. This could include community events that highlight the work done by HTS.
5. 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 HTS.
 - a. Representation on the HTS 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 HTS 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?

6. Continue seeking funding opportunities to continue project momentum and sustainability after the end of the CDC cooperative agreement.

Overall, HTS 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.