

Rural Tennessee Churches and Coalitions Help Congregants Make Healthy Choices

Cori Sweet

At A Glance

In four rural Tennessee counties, community-led coalitions partnered with the faith community to promote nutrition and physical activity with their congregants. These activities included establishing fruit and vegetable gardens, supporting healthy cooking practices for gatherings and activities, and providing exercise and sports supplies to increase physical activity access. More than 1,400 congregation members have benefited from these initiatives.

Public Health Challenge

In Tennessee, 35% of adults have obesity, higher than the US average of 30% (2016 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System). Haywood, Humphreys, Lake, and Lauderdale counties were identified as high-obesity counties (adult obesity >40%) by the Centers for Disease Control's Programs to Reduce Obesity in High Obesity Areas 2014 Cooperative Agreement. Obesity can lead to high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and type 2 diabetes. Low access to affordable healthy foods and places to get physical activity can contribute to the complex issue of obesity. The University of Tennessee Extension led a 2015 needs assessment in these counties. Residents identified lack of quality produce, affordable healthy eating options, and physical activity opportunities as barriers to healthy living.



Find Out More

To learn more about C3 Coalition initiatives in Haywood, Humphreys, Lake and Lauderdale counties, go to bemorelivemore.org. This initiative is supported through the Programs to Reduce Obesity in High Obesity Areas (1416) Cooperative Agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Approach

University of Tennessee Extension focused on obesity prevention efforts in Haywood, Humphreys, Lake, and Lauderdale Counties. Each county formed a Community Coalition for Change (C3) made up of local leaders who volunteer their time and passion to promote health in their communities. Focus groups of these leaders identified the faith-based community as a common strength and potential source of positive influence in all four counties. C3 Coalitions partnered with church communities to provide resources and educate church leadership on how to change church policies and environments to encourage lasting health behaviors.

Results

Over 1,400 members in 15 churches now have increased access to healthier food options or physical activity opportunities. The coalitions helped start four church gardens, and local families in need received donated produce. Ten churches received cooking supplies, including kitchen appliances, water coolers, and grills to prepare healthy options at gatherings, improving healthy food access for 940 congregation members. Eight churches also received exercise, play, and sports equipment, which improved physical activity access for 650 members. Residents who are not members can attend community outreach health events held by some churches.

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There's probably countless families here in Haywood County, and maybe even some outside of Haywood County, that are eating a little better because of this funding and what our church was able to provide.

- Sarah Poole, Union Grove United Methodist Church Member

What's Next

C3 Coalitions worked with church leadership and congregants to develop sustainability plans that support long-term success and expansion of interventions when possible. Additionally, several church leaders and members of congregations have taken ownership of C3 health related programs and initiatives. Churches in one county have begun collaborating on programs beyond C3. These actions indicate the churches will continue to support healthy behaviors and changes.