

Introduction

In 2012, the Geary County Health Department, Geary Community Hospital, and Geary County Schools – USD 475 began an effort to conduct a comprehensive community health assessment to engage the community in identifying ways to improve the health of Geary County residents. Assessment of a community's health status is one of public health's core functions. A comprehensive, quality, community health assessment offers many benefits to a community, including:

- A deeper understanding of community health issues of importance — both in terms of community perceptions and epidemiological prevalence — and the assets that a community has available to address those issues.
- A better ability to respond to community health issues.
- Empirical support for identifying and prioritizing programs, policies, and environmental or systems change that will help support improved health in the community.

From October 2013 through February 2014, members of the community were engaged in this assessment to identify issues impacting the health of Geary County residents. Multiple methods were used to gather information, with a goal of optimizing opportunities to hear from diverse voices across the community, including typically underrepresented voices. Overall, more than 710 people participated in the community health assessment of Geary County. To identify those issues that reflect the priorities of Geary County residents, findings for each of the methods used in the community health assessment were examined to identify common themes. Thirteen community issues were identified through multiple methods used in the assessment.

How can we improve the health of our community?

Recognizing the need to focus on a manageable set of issues, community members were invited to participate in three community forums in September 2014 and one Community Connections meeting in January 2015 that included priority-setting exercises, with the goal to choose a more narrow set of issues that would become the primary focus of the community health plan. Through this process a set of 3 “priority issues” were chosen to become part of this plan:

- Access to healthy foods
- Community Collaborations
- Poverty- jobs, housing, and transportation

Once these priority issues were chosen, residents and community leaders were invited to participate in three separate work groups to develop specific goals, objectives and strategies around the three issues. Their recommendations were used as the basis for developing this Community Health Plan. Through the process of creating the plan we've begun a community dialogue designed to:

- Create a set of goals for a healthier Geary County
- Adopt strategies to promote health
- Promote collaboration among key stakeholders to create meaningful change.

The Geary County Community Health Plan

A broad array of community partners met between February and March 2015 to develop the Geary County Health Plan. Community members that represented multiple sectors and diverse backgrounds were recruited to participate in the work groups for each priority area (please see Appendix A for a list of members by work group). Each group was dedicated to one of the three priority issues to: 1) develop an overarching goal; 2) identify risk factors contributing to the problem yet feasible to address given community strengths and resources; 3) identify and prioritize strategies to address risk factors; and, 4) develop measurable objectives to track progress and outcomes moving forward.

Personal attributes (e.g. age, genes), behaviors (e.g. exercise, nutrition), and environmental factors (e.g. pollution, built environment) all influence our health and quality of life. Therefore, similar to the community health assessment, work group members committed to identifying policy, systems, or environmental strategies that could target risk factors associated with poorer health outcomes across many socio-ecological levels, as opposed to focusing only on interventions aimed at the individual-level (see Figure 1).

Policy, systems, and environmental interventions often involve physical change to the environment or changes in rules or laws (governmental or organizational) to promote a desired outcome. Some examples could include establishing a food policy council, bike lanes and safe pedestrian pathways, or a locally-funded workforce development system.

The following are the goals, objectives, strategies, and activities for community engagement identified by the work groups. The table outlines the topic area, related goal, and identified strategies. Each following section is devoted to summarizing evidence, outlining objectives, and detailing each strategy for the three topic areas. The final section provides information about next steps for action and information about how to stay engaged in the process.



Source: Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991

Figure 1. Socio-ecological levels influencing health

Geary County Community Health Plan

Work Group

Goal

Strategies

Access to Healthy Foods	To inspire our community to eat healthy by improving access to nutritious, convenient, and affordable food choices.	Increase food security for children and families in Geary County
		Increase knowledge about healthy food and healthy food options
		Improved organized efforts to promote healthy foods

Community Collaborations	To help Geary County residents thrive by organizations working together, connecting people to resources, and sustaining community involvement.	Develop a shared vision among public health and community-based organizations.
		Increase collaboration among community organizations.
		Increase awareness of the vision, mission, and work of other organizations.

Poverty- Jobs, Housing, and Transportation	To improve quality of life for all Geary County residents by enhancing policies and systems that promote economic security	Increase access to jobs and community resources for those with limited incomes.
		Increase access to public transportation and alternative transportation infrastructure.
		Increase access to affordable and quality housing.

Access to Healthy Foods

“We can’t resist it – there’s access to unhealthy foods, but messages about the importance of healthy eating – mixed messages, and unhealthy foods is what’s accessible.”

-Comment from youth PhotoVoice participant

We all know that having a nutritious diet, one that focuses on foods and beverages that help maintain a healthy weight, promotes health and prevents disease. It is well known that a healthy eating plan should include:

- Plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains
- Fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products
- Lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, and nuts
- Limited saturated fats, *trans* fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars

Evidence suggests, however, that very few Geary County residents are able to eat as healthy as is optimal¹. More than one-third of Geary County residents do not consume even one serving of fruit daily and more than one-fifth do not consume one serving of vegetables daily.² Further, large portions of Junction City and Geary County are regarded as food deserts –indicating that they are areas in overall access to healthy foods is limited and low-income residents have difficulty accessing healthy foods³. Geary County residents also indicated that the availability and affordability of healthy foods for all community members is perceived as a relative problem.

The Access to Healthy Foods work group focused on three key risk factors present in Geary County: 1) food insecurity; 2) a lack of knowledge about healthy food and healthy food options; and, 3) a lack of organized effort to promote healthy foods. The goals and objectives developed by this work group are outline below.

Goal: To inspire our community to eat healthy by improving access to nutritious, convenient, and affordable food choices.

Objectives:

- A. By 2020, reduce household food insecurity and in doing so reduce hunger by 10%.
- B. By 2020, the percentage of Geary County residents who are overweight or obese (BMI>25) will decrease by 10%
- C. By 2020, reduce the proportion of children and adolescents who are considered obese by 10%.
- D. By 2017, the proportion of Geary County residents who do not have access to a food retail outlet that sells fresh fruit and vegetables will decrease by 5%.
- E. By 2020, increase the percentage of public school children participating in the free and reduced price breakfast and lunch programs by 10%.
- F. By 2017, reduce the percent of unhealthy food and beverages sold in public sites/workspaces (tax payer supported entities) by 50%.
- G. By 2017, the proportion of Geary County worksites that offer nutrition or weight management classes will increase by 20%.
- H. By 2017, fruit and vegetable options within restaurants/food retailers will increase by 25%.
- I. By 2020, the number of residents consuming fewer than five servings of fruits and vegetables daily will decrease by 10%

¹ Geary County Health Assessment Report (2014).

² Kansas Behavior Risk Factor and Surveillance System. <http://www.kdheks.gov/brfss/index.html>

³ USDA Economic Research Service

Strategy 1: Increase food security for children and families in Geary County.

Activities for community engagement:

1. Expand and increase participation in school breakfast programs
2. Improve the nutrition environment in schools by improving choices for healthy food options on school menus
3. Advocate locally for legislative changes in SNAP benefits
4. Increase food access through transportation
5. Increase participation in government nutrition programs

Strategy 2: Increase knowledge about healthy food and healthy food options.

Activities for community engagement:

1. Reduce or eliminate advertising of non-nutritious foods and beverages in schools
2. Healthy vending machine options (e.g. reduce price of healthy choices/increase number of healthy choices)
3. Healthy eating media campaigns
4. Encourage active living and healthy eating at work
5. Point-of-decision prompts: healthy food choices

Strategy 3: Improved organized efforts to promote healthy foods.

Activities for community engagement:

1. Establish a food policy council
2. Introduce, modify, and utilize health-promoting food and beverage retailing and distribution policies

Community Collaboration

“There is great support from city and county commissioners. There are a lot dedicated leaders within different social systems, knowledgeable about the issues that need addressed. We have all of the right players at the table, we just need a great strategic plan to make it all happen.”

- Comment from a key informant.

The National Public Health Performance Standards (NPHPS) put for by the CDC, details and assesses 10 essential public health services that should be provided by every community⁴. Mobilization of community partnerships to identify and solve health problems is one of these essential services. Community members did identify several organizations regarded as community assets such as the hospital, health department, and community health center among many others. However, other noted that community partnerships needed to be stronger in Geary County. Further, according to the LPHSA⁵, mobilization of community partnerships was ranked as an issue of high priority but low performance among public health officials in Geary County.

Members of the work group examined the personal and environmental factors that contribute to the problem, and specifically chose to address three factors that make a substantive contribution to the problem but are changeable. These factors are: (1) lack of a shared vision among public health and community-based organization; (2) a lack of collaboration among community organizations; and (3) lack of awareness of the vision, mission, and work of other organizations. The goal and objectives identified by the work group are listed below.

Goal: To help Geary County residents thrive by organizations working together, connecting people to resources, and sustaining community involvement.

Objectives:

- A. By 2017, the number of community groups/representatives engaged in an organized effort to improve community health will increase by 50%.
- B. By 2017, Geary County residents will rate the level of establishing community partnerships and strategic alliances to provide a comprehensive approach to improving community health as optimal according the LPHSA.
- C. By 2017, Geary County leaders will establish a broad-based community health improvement committee.
- D. By 2017, Geary County leaders will increase the number of organizational practices that promote collaboration.
- E. By 2017, Geary County residents will rate the level of engaging the community throughout the process of setting priorities, developing plans and implementing health education and health promotion activities as optimal according to the LPHSA.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), <http://www.cdc.gov/nphps/essentialServices.html>

⁵ Geary County Health Assessment Report (2014).

Strategy 1: Develop a shared vision among public health and community-based organizations.

Activities for community engagement:

1. Motivate greater involvement including:
 - a. Communicate a positive attitude about successes
 - b. Establish movable meetings to all partners/collaborating entities
 - c. Knowing the history and values of the people you want to attract to the effort
 - d. Recognizing strengths and needs (e.g. talents and skills and recognized for efforts)
 - e. Match skills with needs
 - f. Establish good communication
2. Develop leadership
 - a. Identify the composition of the ideal leadership team (e.g. specify the appropriate number of leaders; is membership inclusive)
 - b. Recruit new leaders (e.g. identify tasks and skills of leadership, assess strengths and weaknesses)
 - c. Develop a plan for leadership development
 - d. Identify methods to support leadership development goals
 - e. Support a great leadership team (e.g. recognize leaders for their effort, work collaboratively to share risk, resources, responsibilities and rewards).

Strategy 2: Increase collaboration among community organizations.

Activities for community engagement:

1. Build relationships among organizations and community members including:
 - a. Engage unheard voices by building relationships with community members from diverse backgrounds
 - b. Build on relationships of group members
 - c. Identify ways to share risk, resources, responsibilities, and rewards
2. Make involvement easier and more rewarding
 - a. Make involvement and outcomes meaningful
 - b. Communicate memorable messages about the value of the effort
 - c. Make more rewards by positive reinforcements
 - d. Make involvement easier and lower cost
 - e. Communicate that participation leads to enhanced abilities and broadened social networking

Strategy 3: Increase awareness of the vision, mission, and work of other organizations.

Activities for community engagement:

1. Educate community members about organizations, missions, and programs
 - a. Establish a clearinghouse of resources
 - b. Develop new ways to get information out to diverse populations
 - c. Enhance cultural competency among professionals

Poverty- Jobs, Housing, and Transportation

“It’s hard for anyone to get a job, education and transportation are barriers. I have to go way out of town to get a job, because I can’t get one here.” – Comment from a focus group participant

It is well established that income and poverty status are key determinants of health⁶. In order to have adequate levels of income and avoid poverty, quality education and jobs, affordable and safe housing, and reliable transportation are needed. Through priority-setting exercises done with Geary County community members, each of these issues related to poverty rose to the top as areas to prioritize for planning in the coming years.

The median household income in Geary County is \$47,879 which is lower than the state of Kansas overall⁷. Additionally, 1 in 4 children and close to 13% of all community members are estimated to be living in poverty in Geary County⁸. Compared to state rates, Geary County has a higher unemployment rate (5.6%)⁹ and a much lower rate of homeownership (39.9%)¹⁰. Further, community members responding to the concerns survey as part of the community health assessment, identified the availability of safe and affordable housing as a relative problem.

Work group participants chose to focus on identifying strategies and solutions targeted at broader categories of income/access to jobs and community resources (e.g. healthcare), transportation, and housing as they relate to poverty and resources for those with lower-incomes. The goal and objectives identified by the work group are listed below.

Goal: To improve quality of life for all Geary County residents by enhancing policies and systems that promote economic security

Objectives:

- A. By 2018, decrease by 1% the percentage of families with income below the poverty level.
- B. By 2018, increase the percentage of adults who have an industry-recognized credential by 5%.
- C. By 2020, increase local funding support for early child care and education by 10%.
- D. By 2020, increase the percentage of affordable housing unit by 10%.
- E. By 2020, increase the percentage of people using public transportation services by 10%.

⁶ CDC (2014). <http://www.cdc.gov/socialdeterminants/Definitions.html>

⁷ United States Census Bureau American Fact Finder (2012) <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>

⁸ US Census Bureau SAIPE <http://www.census.gov/did/www/saipe>

⁹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://data.bls.gov/pdq/querytool.jsp?survey=la>

¹⁰ US Census Bureau <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>

Strategy 1: Increase access to jobs and community resources for those with limited incomes.

Activities for community engagement:

1. Develop a Self-Help Housing Program
2. Develop Gold Standard housing rating system
3. Establish financial navigator services

Strategy 2: Increase access to public transportation and alternative transportation infrastructure.

Activities for community engagement:

1. Establish public services in locations accessible to more people (e.g. satellite clinics)
2. Development of alternate transportation infrastructure (e.g. sidewalks, bike lanes)
3. Extend day, hours, and routes of the ATA

Strategy 3: Increase access to affordable and quality housing.

Activities for community engagement:

1. Support two-generation strategies to reduce poverty (e.g. bridging workforce, education, and human service systems to inform and support children and parents)
2. Provide disadvantaged workers with skills (e.g. job training, financial management) to succeed in the local labor market
3. Develop communication between business leaders and community to establish a shared vision for Geary County

Next Steps: Vision, Mission, and Action Planning

The goals, strategies, and objectives outlined above are a critical first step in developing a community health improvement plan. Community members have come together and identified strategies to improve health and quality of life that they deem are important and feasible to address. This planning document is a starting place for action around each of those priority areas and strategies. However, before implementation of these strategies can begin, it will be important to develop a clear and shared vision and mission and action plans to organize the work ahead.

Planning leaders and work group members will establish clear vision and mission statements. The vision statement will communicate to the larger community what is believed to be an ideal condition for community residents and what success will look like. The mission statement will broadly describe what the planning groups will accomplish and how. For example, a vision statement might be, “Health for All Geary County”. A mission statement could state, “To create a healthier Geary County by increasing opportunities for community collaboration, economic security, and healthy lifestyles.” A good vision and mission statement will build group consensus, communicate broad goals to larger audiences, and allow the group to maintain a focus on short-term goals while keeping sight of the long-term vision.

With these critical pieces in place, action planning can commence. Action plans will detail how strategies will be implemented to accomplish objectives. Action steps will be developed for each strategy prioritized in the work groups and will consist of information regarding what will be done, by whom, when, and with what resources. By taking these important next steps, Geary County will be well on its way to improved health for all residents.

Call to Action

Community members have been actively involved throughout this process. Incorporating voices from all areas of the community and keeping members actively engaged is important for success. We encourage all readers to think of ways you can contribute to making Geary County an even healthier place to live, work, and play. Here are some things you might consider:

- Get involved with groups to develop action plans
- Stay involved with groups working to implement the plan
- Share what you are doing to implement the plan

Please visit the Geary County Health Department website (<http://www.gcphd.org>), or contact the health department by email (admin@gcphd.org) or by phone (785-762-5788) if you would like information on formal work groups, including information about getting involved.

Appendix A. List of work group members