Obesity Task Force Success Story

Initiative Name

(BITE) The Balancing In Take and Expenditure Project

Background Information

1. **What made you decide to begin your initiative?**
The Nutrition and Physical Activity (NPA) Division of the Alabama Department of Public Health and the State Obesity Task Force (OTF) utilized a funding opportunity from the Chronic Disease Directors Association and awarded for five Alabama communities (Anniston, Birmingham, Greensboro, Millbrook, and Montgomery) small, individual grants.

2. **What type of change did you decide to make and where did it take place? (School, church, worksite, etc.)**
The specific grant details were selected by each of the five communities; however, they were each required to address environmental, policy, or systems changes to support improved nutrition or increased physical activity.

3. **What was your goal?**
The goal of the NPA and OTF was to support and mobilize local communities in increasing physical activity and/or healthy eating venues.

4. **What resources did you use to help you make the change?**
A one-time funding allocation was divided among the five selected communities. A community internet based planning guide was provided to three of the five communities.

Specific Details

1. **What were the basic steps you took in making the change?**
   - **Jacksonville State University (JSU)/Anniston Wellness Program:** The JSU Wellness program used a two prong approach to reach senior adults and youth. Efforts were targeted to increase the number of senior adults participating in the walking club while increasing the average distance the walkers completed. Participants were provided pedometers and access to body composition assessments. Youth in the community were provided an educational trip to the farmer’s market to increase knowledge and consumption of fruits and vegetables.
   - **Jefferson County Childhood Obesity Task Force in Birmingham:** The Jefferson County Childhood Obesity Task Force (JCCOTF) worked with the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) to design a Public Service Announcement (PSA) “for kids by kids” to encourage healthier choices. The JCCOTF advocated and promoted healthy lifestyles by posting all projects on the BITE website.
• **Auburn University Rural Studio-Lions Park in Greensboro:** The Rural Studio of Auburn University worked with the Greensboro Lions Park Committee on an existing project to improve the local recreational facilities. This five year multi-phase project included two basketball courts, two tee ball fields, four full-sized baseball fields, three volleyball courts, soccer/football field, stage performance area, restroom facilities, skate park, and a half mile extension of a walking trail. Funds from this grant enabled work on the walking trail to be completed.

• **Alabama Gem City Preparation in Millbrook/Montgomery:** The Alabama Gem City Preparation developed a training manual for implementing healthy lifestyle choices for nutrition and physical activity in faith-based health interventions. Wellness and nutrition events were held at community churches utilizing the manual.

• **Montgomery Area Wellness Coalition:** The Montgomery Area Wellness Coalition originally worked with local residents and students of rural Lowndes County to plant and harvest a community garden. Profits from the produce sales were to be used for sustaining the garden.

2. **How long did it take for you to see changes?**

All programs received funding in February 2009 and the grant period concluded July 2010.

The JSU/Anniston Wellness program’s participation rates increase was noted by spring 2009. The program continues to offer new venues to keep the interest and participation growing.

The JCCOTF goal was awareness, which is often more difficult to measure. The Task Force began four years ago with several organizations working together to better understand the networking opportunities and the individual roles for each organization as a part of a task force. A community resource list was created to help the organizations promote each other’s work to the public.

Changes have been observed by faculty and staff of the Rural Studio of Auburn University. In comparing the park’s facility and community use from 2005 to the present, a noticeable increase has occurred. Before Rural Studio’s involvement, Lions Park was slated to become an industrial park. Community members formed the Lions Park Committee and contacted Auburn University for help. The goal of creating an “ultimate park” for the city is in its final stages of construction.

The goal for Alabama Gem City Preparation to create a manual for health initiatives in faith-based communities has provided a change in the procedures used by several of the local churches. Determining the exact amount of progress made in making healthy lifestyle improvement in the participants was not a goal of this grant, but is an ultimate desire of the group.

The Montgomery Area Wellness Coalition wanted to increase consumption of local produce. Testimonies indicated students had a higher interest in community gardens because of their direct involvement. The first planting, known as the watermelon project, was successful--the
students and teachers were receptive to eating fresh produce despite its messy structure. While the second planting—pumpkins and collards were not as successful, the third and final planting of corn during the spring was a success. In July, over 1,000 ears were harvested and shared with the local church school and to community members who were willing to come to the garden.

3. **How did you know when you were successful?**

Each of the communities expressed success through an increase in citizens’ interest and participation of the programs.

The JSU/Anniston Wellness program experienced an increase in participation and an increase in individual participant steps and mileage.

The JCCOTF indicated an increased interest concerning fresh food as evidenced by increased questions and a greater participation at a local community garden, Jones Valley Urban Farm.

The Rural Studio and Lions Park Committee knew that the additional facilities- including the walking trail extension- was successful by the increase of families and organizations utilizing the park area.

Alabama Gem City Preparation committee chair, Choona Lang, reported an increase interest in healthy initiatives as indicated by the faith based organizations seeking help and guidance from the manual. In addition, the church members are implementing changes to improve food and physical activity choices in church procedures outside of the health events. A future goal of the organization is to track the number of people who lose weight, reduced required medications, and report increased energy levels.

4. **What barriers, if any, did you have and how did you overcome them?**

All communities indicated “Southern traditions”, which were characterized with fried foods, tasty desserts, and a dependence on motorized transportation, were obstacles in addressing lifestyle changes. In discussing this with each project officer, the following statements were shared.

JSU/Aniston Wellness program faced the barrier of maintaining the participation after the annual kickoff event. Incentives, such as the pedometers, were used as positive reinforcement. As the coordinator of the program, Mr. Fred Smith continues to find positive reinforcement tools. By posting a chart with members’ mileage, he saw a friendly competition develop.

The JCCOTF reported individuals with lifelong unhealthy habits were the hardest to motivate. Ms. Bree Garrett stated that the Task Force’s uses a positive strategy. “We do not tell people what they are doing wrong. Instead, messages are focused on a healthier way of living to make people feel better.”
Courtney Mathias indicated the largest barrier in the Lions Park project was the communication between Auburn’s Rural Studio and the citizens of Greensboro. This site was provided the internet tool; however, Ms. Mathias stated, “Over the years the studio team members discovered the best interaction with the local committee is through personal interaction compared to a phone call or email.”

Choona Lang indicated that a large barrier to implementing the program was the amount of funding provided by the grant. The small budget prevented the committee from serving meals during the community church awareness events. The committee worked around the budget issues by offering healthy snacks.

The Montgomery Area Wellness Coalition experienced several barriers with the community garden project. The first planting, known as the watermelon project, was successful. However, the harvest of the fall garden of pumpkins and collards was not successful. Student participation was limited due to the school winter schedule and a lack of transportation funds. To overcome this, a local restaurant used the majority of pumpkins for their establishment. The collards were not harvested due to the deer consuming the plants. The third planting of corn was a successful, although the Wellness Coalition had lost several employees due to another grant’s ending, and there were limited resources to involve as many students and community members as was desired.

Results:

1. What changes occurred?
Each community took ownership of a particular change:

The JSU/Anniston Wellness program increased the number of participants and the number of steps taken/miles walked by the participants, which resulted in a desired weight loss for participants.

The JCCOTF completed their social marketing materials and is currently working with local television stations and other venues to air the PSA.

An increase number of people using the walking trail and other recreational facilities have been noted by the Rural Studio and Greensboro committee members. A stronger bond between the community and Rural Studio has been an unexpected benefit. Ms. Mathias stated, “The committee and Studio have worked together to provide the city of Greensboro with resources to help promote a healthy lifestyle as well as financial resources to help improve Lions Park and the city.”
The communities participating in the events sponsored by Alabama Gem City Preparation displayed an increased interest in nutrition and their health. In addition, other religious organizations are able to use the manual to host events that offer healthier food selections.

The Montgomery Area Wellness Coalition’s goals for the Community Garden Project in Lowndes County changed during the course of the project. The initial goal for the garden was to increase the produce available through a sustainable garden in a small rural area with the support of the county school and local community to plant and harvest the garden. Because the group was using evaluation strategies all throughout the project, the barriers and unexpected events caused the Coalition leaders to redirect the project. It was decided not to continue the sustainable garden concept. Instead, a single-crop produce, corn, was selected for the last garden because of its ease in maintain and harvesting. The harvest party for the corn was a community awareness effort which provided over 1,000 ears of corn. No future gardens are planned at this time.

2. Briefly explain how the change affected your community or community organization (school, church, worksite, etc.)

The JSU Anniston Wellness program has continued to keep participants interested in health changes. Media coverage of event is use to promote programs.

Outreach meetings, promotional educational events, and social marketing materials advocating childhood obesity awareness helped increase the knowledge of nutrition and physical activity in low-income rural and inner city residents in the Jefferson County area. The increased interest assisted in securing additional grant funds such as the Healthy Kids Healthy Communities Grant and the Communities Putting Prevent to Work grant.

The Rural Studio allows Auburn undergraduate architecture students to work with the public sector and gain valuable work experience. Ms. Mathias stated that this project helped the city of Greensboro with the Lions Park and has also helped the interaction between the students and community leaders. There is evidence of community inspiration in that the community has been inspired to take ownership of the park. Mike Hall, the Greensboro Baseball Association director, supports the changes made to the park. He agreed that the changes created a vital recreational space for individuals of all ages, which was important to the Greensboro community because they lacked such facilities before.

There were some successes with the Montgomery project—involving students in the first planting and members of the faith community in harvest of the third crop; however, a lesson learned is that a community garden is a very labor-intensive and unpredictable effort. It required much more involvement of resources outside the Wellness Coalition—the county extension services and the public health department—to achieve the success that was achieved.
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