

Engaging Rural Communities in Obesity Prevention

Perspectives from Extension Field Faculty

Patty Case, Klamath County Extension; Beret Halverson, Clackamas County Extension; Jenny Rudolph, Columbia County Extension

ABSTRACT

Generating Rural Options for Weight Healthy Kids and Communities (GROW HKC) is a research project being conducted in six rural communities in Oregon to better understand what contributes to obesity in rural youth. Community engagement is one component of the project in which Extension field faculty help stakeholders identify opportunities and barriers within their respective communities that they desire to change and which will improve access to physical activity and/or healthy eating. To accomplish this, field faculty use a process called Healthy Eating Active Living: Mapping Attributes-Participatory Photographic Surveys (HEAL MAPPS).

For community-based research projects to be successful, university researchers and Extension field faculty must work in tandem to meet research objectives while building community participation and trust. Extension field faculty in this project play an important role and share in their unique perspectives in the use of HEAL MAPPS to engage their communities.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of HEAL MAPPS process is to engage community members in six rural communities in Oregon to address prevention of childhood obesity.

RATIONALE

Researchers have suggested that rural residency is a risk factor for children being overweight or obese when compared to urban areas (36% vs. 30%). Contributors to an obesogenic environment in a rural community may include long commutes, limited access to physical activity programs or parks, and less access to healthy foods. Engaging community members in identifying problems and working towards solutions can result in positive community supports for healthy lifestyles.



Community Engagement Process



INTERVENTION

University researchers and field faculty at O.S.U. are working collaboratively with community members to assess community supports and barriers to healthy living using photo-enabled GPS units to map community features also called Healthy Eating Active Living Mapping Attributes using Participatory Photographic Surveys (HEAL MAPPS). The HEAL MAPPS process engages community members throughout the lifecycle of the project—at the onset, to identify a coalition of stakeholders, during the project, as collectors and interpreters of data and at the conclusion as catalyzers of community change.



CONCLUSION

For a community-based participatory research project such as GROW-HKC to be successful, university researchers and field faculty must work in tandem to meet the research objectives while building and maintaining community participation and trust. At times, these goals appear in conflict. To ensure success, the field faculty serve an important role to:

- closely examine the communities and their personal/professional networks,
- garner support by translating research objectives into meaningful outcomes for the communities,
- build personal connections to ensure participation and
- manage expectations of community members and organizations.

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