

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Well Connected Communities initiative: Building a culture of health in Idaho

AT A GLANCE

Three Idaho communities implement a national health initiative focused on improving and sustaining overall wellness through education, volunteerism and policy change.

The Situation

There are few aspects of our daily lives that do not impact the health of our communities. Research shows that a variety of conditions in the communities where we live, work and play factor into our ability to live healthy lifestyles. Rural Idaho communities have fewer options for exercise, safe environments, family and social support systems, and health care resources.

U.S. News and World Report ranks Idaho as 40 out of 50 states for access to health care (2018). Recent voter-approved Medicaid expansion indicates residents' desires to improve community health by adding insurance coverage for more people. In addition, Idaho is consistently among the states with the highest rates of suicide, with 2018 being its highest recorded rate ever. Idaho families that have lower incomes, who tend to be uninsured and/or are non-English speaking, face greater barriers to living a healthy lifestyle. For unmet health needs to be accurately assessed and then adequately addressed, community members must be directly involved with each step of the process.

Our Response

Well Connected Communities (WCC) is a nationwide effort to cultivate wellness led by America's



Marsing teen participates in WCC by volunteering at the local food pantry.

Cooperative Extension System in partnership with National 4-H Council and with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. University of Idaho Extension joined this initiative as a self-funded participant in 2017. Today, UI Extension faculty and staff are busy implementing the initiative in three Idaho communities: Caldwell (Canyon County), Preston (Franklin County) and Marsing (Owyhee County). The overall health rankings (out of 42 counties) for each county are 17, 33 and 42, respectively with one being the best (County Health Rankings and Roadmaps).

Each of these communities has established a health coalition comprised of youth and adult residents, local government officials, and liaisons from organizations

and businesses. With the support of UI Extension facilitators, each coalition has a Community Health Action Plan that utilizes youth-adult partnerships to make progress on goals. These goals include to eliminate health disparities; achieve greater health equity; provide health education; train community wellness volunteers; and positively influence local policy, systems and the environment.

The WCC team has worked to integrate three sectors of participants: health coalition members, trained community wellness volunteers and 4-H teen health advocates. WCC participants can be involved at one, two or even all three levels.

Program Outcomes

The community of Preston joined WCC in 2020, establishing the Franklin County Health Coalition. To address the high rates of obesity and physical inactivity, the Coalition members (youth and adults) compiled a list of almost 50 locations for people to be physically active in the county. They are assessing options, such as apps or social media, for sharing and tracking the use of these physical activity resources.

The Marsing Health Coalition has embraced youth-adult partnerships, with two youth members serving as co-facilitators with the Extension leader. This coalition's most prominent partnership is with the Marsing School District's HUB, which hosts a food and clothing pantry. The coalition is working on a school policy change that allows teens to volunteer at the HUB during school hours. During summer 2020, the coalition hosted COVID-19 information booths at community events. Teens from Marsing and Caldwell were trained

on the Stanford Medicine Tobacco Prevention Toolkit in 2019. One teen health advocate presented the toolkit's vaping prevention education to the coalition and the school district. She is planning to teach the program to all sixth-grade students in the district. The Marsing and Caldwell Extension educators and teen health advocates also produced a vaping prevention video.

The Caldwell Health Coalition, with 21 active members, supported three healthy foods distribution events for limited-resourced families. To maximize these events, the coalition created and distributed handouts with basic community resources as well as health flyers that focused on COVID-19 information in English and Spanish. The coalition has made use of its website and social media platforms to promote health focused opportunities in the community. They also engaged in the 2C Kids Succeed Week — Hope Letters initiative, promoting and writing letters to nominated citizens (youth and adults) who needed a letter of encouragement.

Extension educators are launching the third round of the Community Wellness Volunteer program in spring 2021 with both live virtual and in-person (with social distancing) classes. These volunteers are improving and sustaining the overall wellness in each community.

When asked about what impact WCC has had on her life, one teen reported:

“For me, [WCC] opened me to a whole different world... I feel like I also gained a lot of knowledge of things in the community and I'm more self-aware now.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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