

# GROWing Resources and Better Health Outcomes in Southwest Virginia



Gathering Resources and Opportunities for Wellness (GROW) Coalition| Cumberland Plateau Health District| Southwest Virginia| Presented By: Amelia Bandy & Leanne Lambert

## Introduction

Cumberland Plateau Health District faces many barriers to healthy outcomes, such as a lack of education, poverty, very rural landscape with most people living at least thirty minutes away from their closest health department or social services office and problems with regular transportation. Resources are very spread out and not many people know of their existence and how to access them.

Our project sought to address the lack of knowledge of health and wellness-related resources in Tazewell and Russell County. We also desired to strengthen the network of providers by referring clients to other agency resources, simply by becoming more informed of each agency and their purpose within the community. We desired to improve the numbers of fruits and vegetable consumption by introducing the Growing Healthy Habits curriculum into Tazewell and Russell County Public Schools and a private daycare in Richlands as well. This project gave CPHD a platform to address community needs that may not have been addressed any other way.

## Project Overview

GROW Coalition chose two initiatives to improve the health of Tazewell and Russell County community members.

An online resource guide was created to provide healthy eating, wellness, social services and event information to online users in one location. GROW Coalition is also working with FoodCare to develop an innovative mobile application that will be free for community members to download so that they can access all of the resources around them and personalize their profile to manage and even improve their health outcomes.

GROW Coalition has also used an SOL-based gardening curriculum in four elementary schools and one daycare center in the two-county area to teach children about the benefits of eating more fruits and vegetables and how to grow their own foods as part of a healthy life. The schools will also have gardens of different sizes installed for their children to use as true learning stations.

## Activities

Cumberland Plateau Health District's first step to targeting the many health concerns was to build a succinct health coalition comprised of community stakeholders and decision makers who were determined to make a positive impact. The coalition meets monthly to discuss progress on the initiatives and give the stakeholders a platform to convene with each other in a way that has not been otherwise possible.

Coalition members and community volunteers take the Growing Healthy Habits curriculum into the schools twice a month to do food tastings, science-based projects, journal activities and more with the children to spark their interest in healthy eating, cooking and gardening.

FoodCare and GROW Coalition are continuing to share ideas and information to publish a mobile version of the web-based resource guide. Coalition members will then disseminate information about how to use the mobile application in their interface with clients, patrons and community members who can benefit from its use.

## Outcomes

The existence of GROW Coalition has been an absolute necessity to the project. The coalition will continue to meet monthly to work on future initiatives and partnerships that address improving public health and wellness. The lack of a community coalition in itself was a major gap and added to the barriers the community faces.

Partnering with the school system has proven difficult, but imperative to reach the youth in a new way and open up possibilities for future projects like this. Getting our foot in the door was a major achievement and providing a valuable tool will go far to increase partnerships in the future.



Billboards to promote existence of online resource guide



Newspaper Ads to promote the online resource guide

## Next Steps

FoodCare will provide training to maintain the mobile application so that we can add our own information after they publish it for us. We plan to continue to utilize the application as part of our future projects since its focus will be improving community health in every aspect. We also plan to include coalition members in this process to get their agencies on board with using the application as well.

Currently, we are in the process of working with each school to determine the ability they have to sustain a classroom garden after our project concludes. Parent volunteers and teachers are necessary to continue working with the students in the outdoor areas. The daycare center in Richlands will integrate the curriculum into their school policy.

## Lessons Learned

The communities in Tazewell and Russell County, Virginia face many barriers to living healthier lifestyles, such as lack of education, distance between resources, poverty, lack of transportation, and more. Most of our coalition members provide services, but there are always better ways to serve the public. Streamlining the resources into a self-serve tool like the online resource guide gives community members access to information that they may not have had access to otherwise. They may have been ashamed to ask where emergency food shelters are located or where they can go for help with domestic violence, but the resource guide houses all of this information and puts it in their hands.

The Growing Healthy Habits curriculum addresses subject matter that our schoolchildren have not been able to touch due to the focus on SOLs. Many of these children come from families that may not know how to prepare fresh fruits and vegetables, do not cook often and have not ever grown their own food. They are learning what the wrong foods do to their bodies and how proper nutrition can help them grow. It is difficult to get our schools to talk about new policy, but we are planting a seed with this curriculum.



## Best Practices

1. Evaluate effectiveness of coalition often. If not properly represented by a certain sector of the community, add and subtract members as necessary. Stakeholders will likely change as initiatives grow and change. Everyone has their own agenda, but at coalition meetings, priority must be given to coalition objectives unless directly related to initiatives.
2. Have an online presence. Facebook is a useful tool to share information. Ask your coalition members to share the information with their friends as well.
3. Get involved in your community! Attend meetings, volunteer and make yourself visible. The best way to find potential partners is to immerse yourself within your surrounding community.