



# Stepping out of the WIC Box: A Community Effort to Improve Access to Healthy Foods in Oceana County, MI



Healthy Families of Oceana County | District Health Department #10 | Oceana County, Michigan | Presented By: Meryl Smith, CLS MA RD, WIC Coordinator; Anne Bianchi, MS RD, WIC Director

## INTRODUCTION

Oceana County is a rural community located on the Lake Michigan shoreline of West Michigan. Residents of the region experience high rates of chronic diseases, such as heart disease, high blood cholesterol, and obesity. According to data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly 60% of adults in Oceana County are either overweight or obese. In addition, 65% of adults have been diagnosed with high cholesterol, and 11% have diabetes.

Compounding these issues is the fact that Oceana County is situated within a food desert region, with 14% of the population experiencing food insecurity, or “a condition of limited or uncertain access to food,” (Feeding America, 2012). With 20% of the population living below the Federal Poverty Level and no publically-accessible transportation system, the county lacks a variety of resources that are needed to ensure that residents have adequate access to healthy foods.

Despite these issues, Oceana County is an active and vibrant community, with strong ties to the agricultural sector and a broad appreciation for community-driven efforts. This project aligned closely with the needs and strengths of the community, and provided a starting point from which various agencies had the opportunity to collaborate on a unified mission: to improve access to environments with healthy foods.



Healthy Choices,  
Healthier Lives!

The HFOC coalition logo and tagline

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

This project sought to reduce the impact of chronic diseases in Oceana County through policy, system, and environmental strategies that a) improve access to healthy foods and beverages and b) strengthen community and clinical linkages. The "Healthy Families of Oceana County" coalition (HFOC) collaborated with local retailers, healthcare providers, and community agencies to develop a variety of projects, including: promotional materials that encourage healthy food choices at grocery stores, food pantries, and restaurants; a "Rx for Healthy Families" prescription pad that enables healthcare providers to refer patients to the WIC program; and a comprehensive resource guide that informs residents about local services. As a result of the initiative, the HFOC coalition has helped to generate a message within the community about the impact of healthy behaviors on long-term health.

## ACTIVITIES

- Collaboration with staff from Michigan State University Extension (MSU-E) for nutrition education, food preparation demonstrations, and Project Fresh classes
- Fresh produce market at Hart WIC clinic, provided by local farmer Joann Rennhack
- Healthy menu guides for local restaurants, in alignment with the USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans
- “Pick Me- I am a Healthy Item!” shelf labels and signage at local grocery stores and a local food pantry (English and Spanish)
- HFOC window decals for partner sites
- Family Resource Bookmark with local agency contact information (English and Spanish)
- Healthy Shopping Guide for local grocery stores (English and Spanish)
- WIC in-service training provided for four local healthcare agencies
- “Rx for Healthy Families” prescription pads to refer women and children to the WIC program, provided to four local healthcare agencies (English and Spanish)
- Seasonal newsletter and project summary distributed to coalition contact list
- Online resources developed, including: interactive resource map, HFOC website, HFOC Facebook page
- Collaboration with the System of Care for Youth for development of a community resource guide



HFOC members helped implement shelf labels at a local grocery store (left), and a healthy menu guide for Trailside Restaurant (middle). A closer look at the shelf label is shown on the right.

## OUTCOMES

As a result of the initiative, low-income families and residents who utilize the local food pantry have access to information that encourages healthier choices. The pantry manager estimated that between 70-90 families access the pantry each week to help supplement their daily meals, stating that pantry users are "noticing the new signs" and "we really feel that we are helping them eat healthier."

Since the implementation of new shelf labels and signs at Gale’s IGA grocery store, the produce manager has requested a continued partnership with the HFOC coalition, suggesting a monthly cooking demonstration for shoppers to sample healthy foods. In addition, the managing staff at Daniel’s Restaurant has stated that customers began ordering healthier items (ex: blueberry oatmeal) as a result of the healthy menu guide.

In addition to these outcomes, the HFOC coalition has reached over 500 county residents through its online presence (i.e. website and Facebook page), and has secured partnerships with additional agencies, including The Ladder Community Center, Country Dairy Farm Store, and a new Hispanic food market. HFOC has also helped facilitate referrals to the WIC program and to insurance enrollment assistance, by distributing 15 “Rx for Healthy Families” prescription pads to local healthcare providers (each with 50 prescription sheets).

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Major Challenges:

- Scheduling an in-service training for the “Rx for Healthy Families” pads at Spectrum Health
- Translating resources and materials to Spanish
- Time commitment for completing the community resource guide
- Maintaining active participation among coalition members

### Strategies for Overcoming Challenges:

- Contacted the office manager directly to schedule during a staff lunchtime meeting
- Requested input from Spanish-speaking staff at a variety of community agencies (ex: Hispanic Center)
- Developed an abbreviated “Family Resource Bookmark”; collaborated with the System of Care for Youth on developing a comprehensive resource guide
- Coordinated small subcommittees to accomplish specific tasks; celebrated successes along the way

### Unexpected Outcomes:

- Positive response throughout the community to the Family Resource Bookmark
- Broad interest among external agencies/individuals in participating in the coalition
- Member participation in development of the sustainability plan

## BEST PRACTICES

- Collaboration with local community agencies is essential for ensuring long-term success and sustainability
- Utilize county data to leverage coalition activities, and develop an evaluation plan early-on to track ongoing data
- Establish small workgroups (“subcommittees”) to assist with completing specific tasks and activities

## NEXT STEPS

As a strategy to ensure sustainability of the project, the leadership team worked with members of the HFOC coalition to develop a long-term action plan. A component of the plan included designating a volunteer group to facilitate the coalition meetings and future endeavors. Staff from MSU-Extension and DHD#10 offered their time and commitment to co-facilitate the activities of the coalition beyond the funding period. The coalition also established a general action plan for the objectives and activities that will be implemented and maintained, and secured partnerships with additional community agencies and retailers to help support this process. Lastly, members of the coalition collaborated with partnering agencies on an application for additional funding through Oceana County’s Community Foundation.



Members of the HFOC Coalition