

Community Health Input Report

Introduction

Healthier Together Pierce & St. Croix Counties is a community coalition working to create and maintain healthy communities and provide a more strategic framework for local health improvement activities. While led by the four hospitals and two public health departments, Healthier Together brings together people and organizations from across the two-county region to identify and respond to local health priorities

County public health agencies and not-for-profit hospitals are both required to conduct regular Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNA) to identify community health priorities and to adopt an implementation strategy to address these priorities. In 2015, executive leaders from the four leaders and two public health departments agreed to a collaborative approach to the next CHNA process. This was kicked off in late 2015 with a stakeholder data review and prioritization process. Healthier Together then hosted community health dialogues with leaders and residents to gather feedback about the priority areas. Community members who were unable to attend the community dialogues were invited to provide input via an online survey.

This summary report highlights the findings from the 2016 community health dialogues in St. Croix and Pierce Counties, the focus of inquiry for the Community Health Needs Assessment. The three priority health needs for 2017–2019 for Healthier Together are:

- Mental Health,
- Obesity/Overweight, and
- Alcohol Abuse.

The information collected from the community health dialogues will be used to supplement public health data and research on best practices in community health improvement to inform action planning for the 2017-2019 Community Health Needs Assessment Implementation Plan.

Community Health Dialogues

Healthier Together partnered with The Improve Group to design, plan and facilitate community health dialogues and focus groups between March and April 2016. The dialogues were open to all members of the community. The meetings were facilitated by The Improve Group and used a World Café methodology. Participants had a chance to engage in discussion about all topics during three, 20 minute rounds. When the group of participants was fewer than 15, the conversation was conducted as a focus group with one facilitator from The Improve Group. Participants were asked to share their vision for health in the community, clarify aspects of the priority health areas that are most important to address, and brainstorm opportunities for Healthier Together to support community health.

Key questions Healthier Together sought to answer through the discussions were as follows:

- Does the community concur with/confirm our top priorities for the region?
- What specific aspect or components of the broad priorities should Healthier Together work to improve?
- What strategies and partnerships should Healthier Together implement in order to address the priorities?

Community dialogues were held in New Richmond, WI on March 31, 2016 and in River Falls, WI on April 7, 2016. A total of 48 community members attended, including representatives of local schools, government agencies, businesses, faith communities, health care organizations, non-profit organizations and advocacy groups.

In addition to the community dialogues, Healthier Together representatives independently conducted nine focus groups, engaging a total of 75 individuals. These focus groups were designed to engage underrepresented populations, including youth, seniors, low-income individuals, people experiencing homelessness, Latino /a residents, and people with developmental disabilities. An online survey was also offered people who could not attend the community dialogues but wanted to provide input on the assessment. Twelve people completed the survey in the corresponding zip codes for St. Croix and Pierce counties.

Key Findings

Mental Health

Vision for health

Participants envisioned a community in which people are more open to talking about mental health needs, there is a decrease stigma, and information about resources and treatment is readily available to the public. They also envisioned mental health services being available to those who cannot travel long distances, such as services being offered in home or having transportation vouchers available. Other ideas for improving mental health care include creating a drop-in clinic, similar to an urgent care, where people who are in crisis can access walk-in services, reducing the financial barriers by providing more insurance options to pay for mental health care, increasing the number of providers in the community, and offering more holistic care. Mental health services would also be available in the schools to assist students with the challenges that they face.

Existing strengths

Several groups are working in River Falls to improve mental health care. For example, NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) and Veterans' Affairs are working to address mental health needs within the community. The Family Resource Center St. Croix Valley provides screenings for postpartum depression. Several organizations work with specific age groups. The YMCA in Hudson offers programming tailored for youth while the Aging and Disability Resource Centers in each county work with the aging population. Additionally, there are programs in prisons that provide mental health treatment for inmates. There is a mental health resource guide for St. Croix County that is available in many schools to use for mental health assessment and to make referrals.

Healthier Together role and opportunities

During the community dialogues, participants brainstormed ways Healthier Together could help address the priority area. Ideas that came out of the session include:

- Partner with schools to increase mental health services in schools.
- Create public service announcements to increase discussion about mental health topics.
- Create an up-to-date resource list of mental health services and providers.
- Increase collaboration with all providers so that healthcare services are not silo-ed.
- Provide alternative treatment options for mental health such as mindfulness training.
- Promote community and family building events that will strengthen social bonds.
- Facilitate easier access to mental health services.

- Recruit more mental health providers and develop a more state of the art clinic.

Obesity/Overweight

Vision for health

Participants envisioned a future in which people in the community exercise together as a social activity. This would include people meeting outside and in gyms for exercise groups, increased peer support to be active, and people choosing to walk or bike as a means of travel. Participants also envisioned more healthy food options, such as smaller and healthier portions at restaurants, less sugar sweetened beverages in the schools, and more access to healthy food through farmer's markets and community gardens. They also would like to see increased physical activity through the use of public trails and parks and more affordable gyms.

Existing strengths

There are several options that exist for people to engage in physical activity including the trail system, biking groups, and open gyms. Healthy food options are available through the Whole Earth Co-op, community gardens, and farmer's markets. Additionally, educational efforts are taking place in schools to teach children about growing their own food and how to cook nutritious meals.

Healthier Together role and opportunities

During the community dialogues, participants brainstormed ways Healthier Together could help address the priority area. Ideas that came out of the session include:

- Promote healthy diet and exercise in schools.
- Provide additional community education around healthy lifestyles.
- Sponsor social activities that promote a healthy eating and exercise.
- Partner with community groups that are working towards the goal of supporting healthy lifestyles.
- Make gyms and fitness centers affordable and accessible.
- Increase healthy food options and restaurants, social functions, and grocery stores.
- Work on policy changes that will increase healthy lifestyles.

Alcohol Abuse

Vision for health

Participants envisioned a community in which there is affordable and accessible treatment options for those that are experiencing chemical addiction. This would include treatment centers as well as aftercare options for people after they complete treatment. In 2019, participants envisioned the existence of a resource guide that people could easily access to know where to go and who to call if they or someone they know is experience problems stemming from alcohol abuse. Participants recognize that there is a strong drinking culture in the region, but hope that in the future there will be more community activities and ways to socialize that are not centered on drinking alcohol. They also recognized the value in educating youth early on about the dangers of alcoholism.

Existing strengths

Participants noted that many in the community are aware that there is a problem with alcohol addiction in the region. Support groups that exist for people seeking treatment include Alcoholics Anonymous. Kinnic Falls Drug and Alcohol Abuse Services provides residential treatment options in River Falls. Veteran's services also provide resources for those seeking treatment, and programs exist within the correctional system to assist youth and adults who are struggling with chemical dependency.

Healthier Together role and opportunities

During the community dialogues, participants brainstormed ways Healthier Together could help address the priority area. Ideas that came out of the session include:

- Encourage healthy activities as an alternative to drinking.
- Use social media to promote services and resources that currently exist.
- Provide educational opportunities about chemical dependency and alcoholism.
- Partner with local government to enact policies around drinking.
- Eliminate activities that encourage binge drinking.
- Address chemical dependency early in life.
- Increase alignment between medical healthcare and chemical dependency treatment providers.
- Provide treatment opportunities that are close by and age appropriate.

Areas of Alignment

Throughout the dialogues, participants brought up the idea of increasing community education about all three priority areas. These educational opportunities could include smaller events, such as classes, and larger campaigns, such as public service announcements. Participants also brought up the need to address each of the priority areas early on in life and suggested working in partnership with schools. They also saw the benefit in mobile services that can come to different parts of the community since travelling long distances is not an option for many members of the community.

Conclusion

The community health dialogues are an opportunity for Healthier Together to engage members of the community and hear from a variety of perspectives about ways to respond to the identified priority health needs. Input shared by community members help guide decisions made about community-based programs and services for each of the entities that makes up Healthier Together.

See <http://www.communitycommons.org/groups/wisconsin-pilot/st-croix-pierce/> for the full CHNA assessment and implementation plan report, available in December 2016.