Utilizing Community-led Mini-grant Projects to Increase Access to Healthy, Affordable Food and Places to be Active

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OBJECTIVES AND BACKGROUND

- Physical activity and a nutritious diet can help reduce the risk of obesity and chronic disease.
- Community well-being is shaped by access to healthy, affordable food and places to be active.
- Voices into Action: The Families, Food, and Health Project (Voices into Action) is a five-year, community-based research and outreach project out of NC State University, NC A&T State University, and NC Cooperative Extension.
- The project draws on community-based research methods and funds mini-grants to improve access to healthy food and places to be active in three counties in North Carolina.
- Fifty-nine mini-grants were awarded over a four-year period (2013 – 2016), in three counties.

TARGET AUDIENCE

- The project engages with community organizations in Southeast Raleigh, Western Harnett County, and Lee County doing work focused on food and physical activity access.
- Communities impacted by these grant projects include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Wake</th>
<th>Harnett</th>
<th>Lee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food Insecurity*</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Below 200% Federal Poverty Line**</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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* Feeding America, “Hunger in America,” 2014. ** US Census Bureau

THEORY AND RATIONALE

- Based on the socio-ecological model, mini-grants facilitate behavior change by creating long-term environmental changes that improve access to food and places to be active.
- Using CBPR methods such as asset mapping, community priorities for mini-grant projects were identified in each county.
- Funded mini-grant projects are required to implement a policy or environmental change, build on or develop community partnerships, and include a plan for sustainability.

DESCRIPTION

Nineteen mini-grants were awarded in 2015 to non-profit and community-based organizations in three counties.

- Community-based action groups in each county were integral to the development of the mini-grant RFP, by:
  - Suggesting revisions to the mini-grant application (for ease of use),
  - Developing community funding priorities, and
  - Serving as grant reviewers.
- Funded projects varied in scope, but included community gardens, walking trails, farmers’ markets, exercise programs, and nutrition education classes.
- Mini-grant recipients, many of whom had never applied for or received a grant, also received technical assistance, including support with project evaluation and impact.

EVALUATION

- Interviews with recipients mid- and post-funding cycle indicated that the experience of receiving the mini-grants has:
  - Increased organizations’ connections to community resources,
  - Fostered community partnerships, and
  - Enhanced organizational capacity related to grant funding and project evaluation.
- Funded projects had a major impact on their communities. Based on numbers reported by 2014-2015 grantees, over 5,200 adults and over 10,500 children were directly impacted by these projects.
- The most successful projects had the following three key characteristics:
  - Strong leadership
  - Dedicated volunteers, and
  - A functional non-profit operation with sound financial practices.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Community-led mini-grant projects can be a viable method of putting research into practice by supporting efforts to improve access to healthy, affordable food and places to be active.

We have identified several key factors that led to program success. These include:

- Partnering with community organizations and leaders to develop grant criteria and evaluate applications.
- Providing intensive technical assistance for grant-writing and implementation, particularly for organizations receiving a first time grant.
- Supporting community leaders doing innovative work, including offering workshops and promoting grant success through news and other media outlets.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Image via CDC.gov

Sanford Farmers’ Market, 2015 Mini-Grantee

Cameron Grove AME Zion Church Garden, 2014-2016 Grantee

Neighbor 2 Neighbor Skate Park, 2015-2016 Grantee