



DOVER YOUTH COMMITTEE

Delaware Well Connected Community Case Study

Issue:

Dover is the capital of Delaware, and a diverse population of individuals live and work in the area. In reviewing the data from County Health Rankings, Kent County ranks as the most at-risk county in terms of the social and clinical determinants of health. In Kent County, 39% of adults rank as obese, 28% report physical inactivity, only 64% of the population lives with adequate community access to physical activity opportunities. Additionally in Kent County, Delaware, 13% of people did not have a reliable source of food. In Kent County, Delaware, adults reported that their mental health was not good on 4.5 of the previous 30 days, slightly above the national average of 4.4; 15% of adults reported that they consider themselves in fair or poor health; Youth Self-reported Use of Prescription Pain Meds without Prescription was 23% as of 2018; 7% of teens and young adults (age 16-19) were neither working nor in school.¹

Over the past 5 – 10 years, efforts to establish and maintain a coalition to address health have been unsuccessful. Kent County has always been the hardest county to develop collaborative partnerships. There have been a few coalitions that started and stopped over the years, one targeting specific activities like gardens, one that was originally supported by a healthcare organization that stopped the personnel and funding support are two that have been identified over the past ten years. When Well Connected Communities first began in 2017, a statewide effort to develop healthy communities had developed a council in Dover. The goal was to address social and clinical barriers to healthier communities, with a focus in Dover. This group met monthly and tried to coalesce around specific issues impacting the community. This group worked on a few projects, but at the end of the grant cycle that was supporting the effort, it ultimately fizzled in 2019.

Moving into the third wave of this effort, University of Delaware Cooperative Extension acknowledged it was still important to focus on the area of the state that continues to rank lowest in health outcomes. However, given the multiple efforts that have occurred in the past, it was important to try something different. To try to develop a coalition, Extension decided to take the approach of focusing on youth-serving organizations.

In the Fall of 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Cooperative Extension put out the call to any youth-serving organizations that would be interested in joining a committee to discuss needs for youth in the community, with a goal to

improve health outcomes. There were 12 attendees at the initial meeting, representing the school district, non-profit organizations, social services, 4-H, and health services, among others. At the beginning of that meeting the following was shared:

The purpose of this initiative is to bring together youth and adults who will work in partnership on projects to improve the health of their community.

We are looking for all organizations that work with Dover youth to join the youth committee to help advise how this new initiative (Well Connected Communities) can best impact youth (5-18 years old) in Dover. Our goal is to align the efforts of all organizations & partner with organizations that have the same end goal of helping youth in Dover be healthy and help steer the committee in making decisions on what would best serve the youth.

The group reviewed data slides, presented by Extension, and had a conversation about what gaps might exist in the community that impact the data that is being reported. Right from the start, the group decided to act. The first item they decided to tackle was learning more about the community and what gaps might exist across the socio-ecological model. Specific action items included: reviewing the data presentation again and narrowing down focus based on the resources identified and gaps found. After conversation at the second meeting, the group decided on issues of food insecurity, education, and mental well-being as most important to address for youth in the area. They also broke up into three subcommittees to work on addressing these areas.

Intervention:

The Dover Youth Committee's mission statement:

The purpose of the Dover Youth Committee is to bring together youth and adults to understand and prioritize health-related issues in the Dover community, and work together to identify community-driven solutions and provide resources to address the needs.

In order to achieve this mission, the group has worked to develop three intervention strategies over the past three years. The first intervention was the very first activity identified as important by the group. It was noted that some of the lack of ability to address some of the largest health issues had to do with a lack of organizational knowledge of what actually was available to youth and families in Dover. Many organizations shared that they were unaware of how to direct youth and families to get food, mental health services and engage in education-based events throughout the community. To ensure more communication about these resources was achieved, the group developed the Resource Guide which is organized by the issue areas, and has short descriptions of the resource and contact information. This guide is updated and shared annually to be sure that everyone has the most up to date information. The first version was shared as a print version for those that were interested, but has since been provided as an e-version. Additionally, the group has a "spotlight" at their meetings that provides community partners the opportunity to share information about their organization, resources and upcoming events with the broader group. This has been a wonderful way to build deeper partnerships across the group, especially as the group navigated through COVID and is working to ensure that post-pandemic, the community has what is needed to thrive.

The second intervention was to share the resources that exist with the broader community. The group decided on a logo and compiled a list of events where they wanted to attend and share information on resources available for the youth in the community.

The final intervention, and one that is ongoing, was to try to gather feedback from youth and families in the community. In addition to fielding a survey, the group decided to host events that focused on the different issue areas. This way, youth and families could come and engage in a health-based activity, and part of the event would be gathering information on needs related to health from the youth.

Results:

The group has been able to grow over the past three years. In terms of a coalition, it is still in its infancy, but the membership has been consistent and growing. The group has been able to gather some feedback from youth serving organizations, and continues to look to do so in order to inform the work of the coalition moving forward. To date, the activities have been an opportunity to gather information while allowing youth an outlet to spend their time and connect, something that they shared was missing during the pandemic.

The Dover Youth Committee currently consists of 90 registered members, with an average of 15 - 25 attending full committee and subcommittee meetings. To date, the committee has hosted/attended 10 events. The events focused on getting information into the community about resources available for mental health and food, engaging youth in learning about healthy eating and physical activity and mindfulness. Activities were at community events, the Boys and Girls Club and also at one of the local housing developments. At the events, conversations were held to better understand the needs of youth in the community.

Information gather included sharing where the youth learn about nutrition:

- Instagram 20%
- Tiktok 20%
- Family and/or Friends 100%
- Celebrities/Athletes 40%
- Marketing/Advertisements 40%
- Other 60% (Other: Teachers)

And youth also shared that they engage in some grocery shopping and some cooking, and would love to see tastier options in their school cafeteria when it comes to accessing nutritious foods.

The youth and adults at a few of the events also shared about some of the needs related to mental health and well-being. Information shared by adults included that teens are influenced heavily by social media and societal stigmas (e.g.; boys don't show emotions). Additional information around stigmas included the connotation of the word mental (specifically in the Black community viewing this related to "mental-retardation" or "crazy"), and among youth the thinking that it's a disease state - "I don't have that" thinking when brought up. While this was a very small group that engaged in this conversation, the information gathered will help to inform the types of information, resources, and events that would be helpful for the community to better assess and manage their health, especially youth.

The group is continuing to explore ways to have an impact in the community. One idea is a community dinner which is a model that was used in a neighboring county as a way to gather members for food and fellowship. This event will have a focus on mental health and food access. While there are subcommittees that focus on these areas individually, the group does strive to

have programs and events that can cover the multiple dimensions of health as it is important to ensure to consider the whole person when looking to understand needs and impact health outcomes.

Lessons Learned and Future Plans

Lessons learned from this work have been important in considering sustainability of this effort. These lessons include:

1. Be patient & listen!
 - Building the committee takes time and consistency
 - Give space for feedback
 - Allowing for silence
 - Don't rush to have a formal committee
2. Be flexible!
 - Be willing to try new ideas
 - Showcase the value of the committee toward common goals
3. Build in little wins to show progress!
 - Smaller, easier to accomplish tasks
4. Have an employee dedicated to this project
 - Can assist/lead administrative and creative tasks
 - Allows for the committee to grow
 - Allows committee members to focus more on action plans

The group is committed to continuing to work together. One of the biggest challenges that lies ahead is gathering the resources to support the personnel needed to oversee the administrative tasks that are important for this work. While University of Delaware Cooperative Extension is able to support a small portion of someone's time to oversee this work, the amount of time needed for preparing agendas and minutes and navigating the many logistics needed to run the events that are still an important goal is more than they can give. The team is seeking additional resources to support a staff member for this in the future, but that has been a challenging task. Additionally, the resources needed to support the events. Many times, the committee comes together to braid funding, or bring forward education or other resources that they may have available, but there is always a need for a small amount of seed funding to make the event happen. This also assists in making it feel less like an event "owned" by one organization but rather one that is owned by the coalition. The opportunity to support some of the needs with the Well Connected Communities funds, and to support the training of volunteers to assist at the events, has been a valuable asset. The group hopes to pursue additional funding streams for these needs in the future as to not be another attempt at a coalition that goes away when the grant cycle ends.