



# Well Connected Communities Wave 2

## MACY - UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA - LINCOLN AND THE TRIBAL EXTENSION OFFICE

### Community Profile

Well Connected Communities (WCC) is a national well-being initiative of America's Cooperative Extension System in partnership with National 4-H Council with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. WCC launched in 2017 and is using the power of combined youth-adult voice and action to recognize and address systemic health inequities. It is scaling successful innovations from this work across the Extension network to catalyze changes at the local, state, and national levels, so that everyone has an equal opportunity to live a better, healthier life.

As part of the evaluation of Well Connected Communities, the Center for Community Health and Evaluation conducted "virtual site visits" with four WCC communities in 2021 to elevate promising practices and gain a deeper understanding of how Extension and communities are working together to advance health equity and wellbeing. Macy, in partnership with Nebraska Extension through the Tribal Extension Office (Extension), has participated in WCC since its inception in 2017.

#### Extension partnership with Macy & Umonhon Nation

Umonhon Nation Public Schools, the Umonhon Tribe, and Extension are building an indigenous food sovereignty and sustainability movement, connecting Macy youth with the land, traditional gardening practices, and their ancestors and history. Community elders work with students, teaching Umonhon language, food traditions, and history, and Extension specialists provide technical assistance. The produce grown and harvested by students returns to the community through a new salad bar at school, farmers' markets, and donations of fresh food baskets to community elders.

Building on the success of the school-based programs, Extension recently launched the Nation Nourishment program, which includes online classes taught by Extension staff. Community participants are growing produce and starting to sell produce and products at the local farmers' market.

The WCC grant and partnership with Extension has helped expand the work happening in Macy; the school now has a farm-to-school director and a larger community garden, and WCC funding has provided materials for the school garden. Extension staff provide technical assistance and lead classes as

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**Location:** Nebraska, part of the Umonhon (Omaha) Nation

WCC Wave 1 and Wave 2 participant

**Extension partner:** University of Nebraska – Lincoln and the Tribal Extension Office

**Type of community:** Rural

**WCC health priorities:** Food security and sovereignty, nutrition education, traditional language and farming/gardening practices

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part of the Nation Nourishment program, and the school-based gardening program includes both tribal elders and Extension specialists.

The program is an emerging example of a successful tribal-Extension partnership, and how to promote holistic community health by re-connecting youth and families to the earth.

A key takeaway for other LGUs working with tribal nations is the importance of hiring Native Americans who have relationships, trust, and expertise in their communities' strengths and needs. Extension staff noted this type of authentic partnership, that takes the lead from the community, requires time and commitment to build.

### **Ashita Thewathe (Let's Go Outside) – youth engagement**

Youth are a key part of the Well Connected Communities work in Macy. Together with Extension staff and community elders, they have planned, built, planted, and harvested a school garden and greenhouse, and contributed to environment and policy change by advocating for local and healthy food in their school system. In this cross-generational partnership, tribal elders pass on traditional and cultural practices and language to youth, and students are engaged in scaling up a local, healthy food system in their community. Youth reported both individual benefits (e.g., reducing stress) and population-level benefits (e.g., helping address chronic diseases and increasing access to healthy food in the community) as a result of being part of the garden and food sovereignty movement.

Providing youth opportunities to take the lead on pieces of the project supports engagement, promotes responsibility, and builds young people's leadership skills. Coalition leaders developed ways that youth of different ages can be involved at different levels – for example, having high school students supervise and support younger students in the garden and greenhouse.

Even with robust engagement of students and youth in this local food movement, coalition leaders have encountered challenges to developing authentic youth-adult partnerships, including:

- Competing priorities for youth, including young adults who have jobs and/or caregiving roles in their homes.
- Limitations on in-person participation and other challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Weighing the relative benefits of developing deeper relationships with a smaller group of participants versus expanding outreach to reach more youth, with perhaps less significant involvement or engagement.

*"We knew that we needed to get the older kids involved, so the community, the school administrators and the faculty created the Good Day program, where high school kids come into this garden and this greenhouse, and mentor the little guys, helping them to plant, prepare the soil, do whatever is needed with this program."*

## Macy - University of Nebraska - Lincoln and the Tribal Extension Office

### Next steps

WCC helped lay the foundation for the next steps of this food sovereignty movement, which includes developing a strategic agriculture plan in conjunction with the tribe and Extension. This plan would bring together the community's sustainable agriculture efforts, tribal funding, and University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension horticultural staff support, building on the success of the school-based work.

Extension is also starting to focus more on policy, systems, and environment changes, with a health equity lens. Building on existing systems-level work happening in Macy has helped accelerate that shift, but it still will take time to grow. Adding staff or faculty specifically focused on health equity would build capacity and accelerate progress on that goal across all of Extension's work. Extension staff are also developing a guidebook for the Food, Nutrition and Health team, intended to support incorporating the new framework and community change cycle into their programming.



*"What we've created for the Macy community, the Omaha tribe, was an inward-outward motion collaboration [that] has to start with relationship building, where trust is established. It's going to take time, and usually it would be good if Native people were identified to go in and work with other Native people. So that collaboration is kind of unique when it comes to working with tribal communities."*

### What is a Well Connected Communities virtual site visit?

In 2021, the WCC evaluation selected four participating communities for more in-depth data collection to better understand how WCC activities were being implemented. Selected communities had to demonstrate active coalition and youth engagement and an orientation to policy, systems, and environmental change work and be willing to participate in additional data collection activities (i.e., interviews with local Extension agents and community members, youth focus group). Virtual site visits occurred in August – October 2021.