



# Well Connected Communities Wave 2

## DENMARK & EAST JACKSON - TENNESSEE

### STATE UNIVERSITY

#### 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 2018 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 late 2021 to elevate promising practices and gain a deeper understanding of how Extension and communities are working together to advance health equity and wellbeing. East Jackson and Denmark, in partnership with the Tennessee State University Extension (Extension), participated in WCC starting in late 2019 (the beginning of Wave 2). Both coalitions collaborate closely and are working in a similar context with similar needs and priorities in their communities.

#### Denmark and East Jackson Well Connected Communities coalitions

In partnership with Extension, Denmark and East Jackson coalition members are improving access to physical activity and nutritious food and creating opportunities for improved health and wellbeing in their communities, both predominately African American communities outside of Jackson, Tennessee. In the last year, the coalitions organized health fairs in their communities that included booths from healthcare providers and community-based organizations, focused on education and preventive healthcare services and screenings. The coalitions added signage to community walking trails and in grocery stores to promote physical activity and healthy eating, and are working with Jackson city officials to create a mobile farmers market that would increase access to local, nutritious food for area residents with transportation or mobility challenges. These priorities were identified through community needs assessments that elevated the need for improved options in both communities, and especially in Denmark, which is a rural, under-resourced food desert.

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**Location:** Western Tennessee, rural/suburban communities outside Jackson, TN

WCC Wave 2 participant

**Extension partner:** Tennessee State University

**Health priorities:** Nutrition and food security, physical activity and physical environment, chronic disease prevention, mental/behavioral health

**Key partners:** City of Jackson, local businesses, faith-based organizations, local health department

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These systems and environment changes in Denmark and East Jackson have benefits to physical health and overall well-being, and a sense that the community is worth investing in. One resident described their community as often feeling left out of programs happening in Jackson, making the WCC investment of resources and activities especially beneficial.

### **Growing community partnerships**

Participating in Well Connected Communities has positively impacted collaboration and the development of new partnerships in East Jackson and Denmark, planting a seed that Extension staff and coalition leadership hope will grow into sustainable community engagement in issues of health and health disparities.

WCC also broadened perspective of what Extension does in the community beyond the areas Extension is most known for, like 4-H. Coalition leaders reflected that a key element of the coalition's success has been involving community members at all steps and levels of programming – Extension should continue to work with the community to identify priorities, and ensure community members have opportunities to be involved in planning and implementation of coalition activities.

### **Youth engagement in WCC: examples and challenges**

Meaningfully bringing youth into community health improvement work was a goal of WCC. For Denmark and East Jackson, youth engagement entailed:

- Planning, promoting, and implementing the community health fairs
- Placing signage in local grocery stores to highlight healthy food options, and mileage signage on local walking trails to encourage physical activity
- Key challenges to youth engaging included competing priorities (academics, sports, other extracurriculars), the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Denmark is also a small and demographically older community, without its own high school, so there are overall fewer youth in the community
- For some youth, initial involvement was a way to get required community services hours. Seeing the positive impact the coalition has on their community can motivate ongoing engagement

*"I would say making sure the communities are involved in everything we do, down to the implementation. Once you do that, they're more invested, you're more invested, and the outcome is greater. When we set up our community health fairs, we worked with our partners in our coalition to get everybody there, but once we included the volunteers, that's when we really saw people wanting to attend."*

## Denmark & East Jackson - Tennessee State University

### Next steps

There are plans within Extension for a new health disparities-focused position that will support health equity work happening across Extension at Tennessee State, providing programming, data, and evaluation support to communities.

Tennessee State University Extension is still developing its focus on policy, systems and environment changes. One recent development is collaboration with local government on financial literacy and empowerment resources, potentially combining efforts with the mobile farmers markets to also provide financial education to East Jackson and Denmark residents. These types of programs and investments will expand the role Extension plays in the community and promote a more holistic view of community wellbeing that includes physical, mental, and financial health.



*"One of the things that enticed them (youth) is the opportunity to gain community service hours, but as they participate in the activities, they see that [they are] actually making the impact, it's not just getting hours for a specific requirement. [They are] actually making a difference"*

### 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.