



Advancing Health Equity and Well-Being in Extension: Summary of Evaluation Results from Well Connected Communities’ investments at 25 Land Grant Universities

Well Connected Communities (WCC) overview

WCC was a seven-year (2017 – 2024) national health equity and well-being initiative within Cooperative Extension (Extension) in partnership with National 4-H Council, with funding support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The initiative occurred at various levels—national, state, and local—by supporting national priorities as well as partnerships with communities through subcontracts to Extension teams at land grant universities (LGUs). The WCC evaluation was conducted by the Center for Community Health and Evaluation starting in late 2019. It included mixed methods data collection at the Extension and community levels. This summary focuses on high-level evaluation findings from WCC implementation by Extension programs at 25 funded LGUs (called LGUs in this summary). Full evaluation report for the LGU-level investment is available [here](#); a subsequent report detailing broader impacts from WCC is forthcoming (early 2025).



WCC initiative goal

Strengthen local collaboration to expand Extension’s health-related work in communities and facilitate changes in how Extension (county, state, national) conducts its work, so that everyone has equal opportunity to live a better, healthier life



LGU funding

Extension programs at 25 LGUs received funding to advance health equity & well-being efforts by partnering with cross-sector coalitions in over 50 communities across the country



WCC support to funded LGUs

- Funding
- Professional development & peer sharing
- National infrastructure, including [health and well-being framework](#)
- Involvement in national health equity and well-being Extension efforts

Key findings from LGU-level evaluation

Five key findings highlight Extension’s systems change efforts and the contributions of the WCC initiative to advancing local health equity and well-being priorities at the 25 funded LGUs.

1

Extension programs strengthened their capacity to support community and coalition-driven work to advance health equity and well-being.

Participating LGUs increased capacity to:

- Operate in service of local health priorities, including respond to COVID-19 pandemic
- Engage as equal partners with the community in project planning and implementation
- Establish local coalitions reflective of the diversity in communities, including youth
- Tailor and target local health improvement efforts to those experiencing inequities
- Focus on policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes

2	Extension programs have a greater understanding of and commitment to advancing health equity as a core value.	<p>LGUs increased capacity and knowledge to operationalize health equity strategies and internal changes to structures and staffing, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrating health equity into state and program strategic plans and priorities • Developing a more diverse, culturally sensitive workforce • Building staff understanding and skills
3	LGUs made internal systems changes to support health equity and well-being.	<p>Internal changes helped shift the way Extension conducts health work, from a direct education model emphasizing individual behavior change to focusing on health equity and well-being. This included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased collaboration across Extension programs • Strengthened health-related staffing, professional development, and performance metrics/incentives • Explicit leadership vision and support at local, state, and national levels
4	WCC's flexible funding model supported community-driven health work and Extension systems changes.	<p>Key components of WCC that supported capacity building and systems change included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible funding and non-prescriptive structure • Youth engagement • Peer sharing across Extension system • Direct support and feedback from WCC program team
5	Coalition-based work will continue and health-related work in Extension programs will grow after WCC.	<p>WCC was a catalyst for advancing health equity and well-being work in LGUs. LGUs shared examples of leveraging internal and external funding to support sustainability. LGUs highlighted a need for broader systems change, particularly in funding structures to support longer-term community health partnerships and PSE change work.</p>

Considerations

Lessons from WCC can inform how Extension continues to implement health equity and well-being priorities, which requires a long-term, relational, and culture change approach.

National level to support local efforts	State/local level to engage with communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure a clear, national vision for advancing health equity and well-being and support local adaptation and adoption • Provide opportunities for peer learning among those doing similar work • Elevate promising practices • Provide practical tools and resources • Consider how to hold and operationalize health equity as a core value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster leadership support at all levels (e.g., to set strategic priorities and allocate resources) • Apply a local approach by adapting strategies to local context • Provide staff with professional development and access to training for foundational skills • Incentivize new ways of working to focus on partnering with communities • Be flexible and responsive to community needs • Leverage partnerships internally and externally to increase capacity and draw on other expertise