

Get Healthy, Trim Down Delta
A Preliminary Community Report for
SUNFLOWER COUNTY

INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that Mississippi is one of the most obese states in the nation. According to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Delta has one of the largest concentrations of obesity in the state. While 33% of Mississippi adults struggle with obesity, 40% of the adult population of Sunflower County is obese. The challenge for Sunflower, and other Delta counties, is to find community solutions to aid in the fight against obesity and its associated negative health outcomes.

Based upon that need, the ***Get Healthy, Trim Down Delta*** project was developed by **Mississippi State University Extension Service to help communities foster the ability of individuals to achieve and maintain a healthy weight.** Supported by the Delta Health Alliance through funding from the Office of Rural Health Policy, a branch of the Health Resources and Services Administration, the project is being conducted in Sunflower, Holmes, Leflore, and Carroll Counties.

As part of this effort, a series of **forums were held to involve the community in a dialogue focused on identifying the resources, and the challenges, to combating obesity in the day-to-day life of the community.** From that dialogue, a number of community action groups were formed to begin developing local solutions that would make it easier for people to achieve a healthy weight.

This report has been developed to give voice to the findings of those forums and the concerned, committed residents of Sunflower County that participated in the process and are working today to turn their concerns into action. It is hoped that others reading this report will see it as more than an informational document. **Civic organizations, churches, businesses, schools, public officials and others may find opportunities in these findings to improve the health and quality of life of their fellow residents by creating an environment supportive of reducing obesity.**

As Dr. C. Everett Koop, the former U.S. Surgeon General has said, “Except for smoking, obesity is now the number one preventable cause of death in this country. Three hundred thousand people die of obesity every year.”

OBJECTIVES

To meet the goal of developing ways to make it simpler to combat obesity in the day-to-day life of the community, the following objectives were established:

- Engage the community in a grassroots effort to prevent and reduce obesity in Sunflower County
- Involve local residents in a volunteer program to educate others on the health risks associated with obesity and strategies to overcome daily influences conducive to obesity
- Identify existing programs in the county geared to changing individual behaviors which lead to obesity

PROCESS

In late September and mid October, 2010, two public forums were held at The Capps Center. The intent of the forums was for the community to begin identifying what was and was not working to support an individual's ability to achieve and maintain a healthy weight and to chart a path forward.

Given the opinions expressed in the forums, what, if anything, did the community want to do? Forty individuals from across the county attended the first forum, and thirty-four attended the second.

The forums were conducted using a modified "World Café" format. The World Café is a format that encourages participation of and dialogue between people attending the sessions. A facilitator aids in initiating table discussions of between six and eight individuals and then their thoughts are joined with those of neighboring tables to build a voice for the room. The results of utilizing the World Café process is identification of a group's collective knowledge enabling people to join together to pursue common aims. The format aids communities in better understanding, relative to the problem of obesity, what is currently working within the community, what people would like to see happen, what they are willing to contribute, or relinquish, for what they want, what ideas they have for getting what they think is needed, what they see as obstacles, and what they are going to do as a result of attending the forum. It is an effective tool to involve people in identifying issues, setting priorities, and finding local solutions to problems as well as developing networking connections between interested parties.

Forum discussions centered on the following key questions:

- **What are the programs, services, resources and other elements that encourage and support achieving and maintaining a healthy weight in Sunflower County?**
- **If you had three wishes, what opportunities to support obesity prevention, currently lacking, are worth pursuing?**
- **How might obesity prevention best be promoted within the county?**
- **What are the main challenges to supporting the goal of reducing obesity?**

FORUM FINDINGS

What's Working?

When participants were asked to consider what was working in Sunflower County to foster one's ability to achieve and maintain a healthy weight numerous examples came forth. Group responses fell into five major categories: (1) Food choices and availability; (2) Exercise and recreational options; (3) Education; (4) Programs and projects; and (5) Other. Examples for each category are listed below:

Food Choices and Availability

- Indianola Open Air Market
- MS Food Network's Food Box Program (for people under 5 and over 60)
- Availability of fresh produce at Farmers' Markets and WalMart
- Transition of products (Example - people/stores changing from white to whole wheat)

Exercise and Recreational Options

- Walking trails and parks
- Fitness gyms
- Swimming pools
- Football field for exercise
- Dance classes
- Walking at WalMart
- Wellness Center coming to Ruleville
- Gym in Indianola
- Parks and Rec Commissions for organized sports

Education

- Healthy Schools Initiative
- Student healthy eating program (part of Living Smart Camp)
- Healthy cooking demonstration classes
- Nutritional information distributed at grocery stores by Delta State dietetic students

Programs and Projects

- Weight Watchers
- Meals on Wheels
- Garden and health ministry grants
- MSU Extension Service's *Mississippi in Motion*
- 11 Delta Promise programs
- Health fairs

Other

- Ideal weather
- Health councils in schools/communities
- Dietary supplements
- Nurses in communities taking blood pressure, glucose levels, etc.
- Doctors and nurses talking about health risks associated with obesity
- Television and radio for homebound people – communicates information

The forum responses are not an exhaustive list of the assets supportive of addressing obesity within Sunflower County, but it is representative and does indicate that the county starts from a position of strength in addressing this issue.

Three Wishes – Multiplied by Many

Having identified what was working in the county, forum participants were asked to consider what else was important and worth pursuing. If they had three wishes, what would they like to see added to or changed within the county? Following is a summation of the group's suggestions:

- Easy access and affordable exercise for youth and adults
- Community gardens
- Food cooking classes
- Organic health food stores or sections in existing stores
- Have a “Healthy Taste of Sunflower” Day
- Advertising focused on healthy eating and exercise
- Weight Watchers to fit everyone’s budget
- Restrict SNAP/EBT cards to healthy choices
- 10,000 Steps program for community
- Increase wellness centers with free services
- Improve community collaboration efforts
- Increase volume/selection of healthy foods in stores
- Start a “Let’s Walk Indianola”
- SNAP/EBT – require participation in seminars about healthy living to educate people before receiving cards
- Start community health walk-a-thons
- Offer reduced price produce
- Motivate community members to participate in physical activities
- A gym in every town
- Organize neighborhood walks
- Teach healthy home cooking
- Hold a healthy recipe exchange
- Pressure insurance companies to pay for wellness programs
- Classes on how to prepare healthy meals in advance
- Restaurants that just serve healthy foods

- Work with restaurants to encourage preparation and offering of healthy meals
- Programs for all children to participate in sporting programs
- Raise awareness within businesses of the health consequences of obesity
- Physical education in schools; currently being increased, but more needed
- Health fairs—expand into schools
- Educate about correct portion sizes
- Education how to read food labels
- More Mississippi State University Extension Service healthy cooking demonstrations
- Healthy food lists in stores; healthy food options in a specific location
- Health coach to work in schools for one year (grant is available)
- Restaurants could highlight healthier options on menus
- Develop a local team to motivate community for action and long term commitment
- More parental support for exercise for children
- Biking trail and recreation facility
- Promote existing programs—(Examples - Quick Start Tennis and Basketball Program)

The “wishes” are listed as they were recorded with no attempt at prioritizing. In the Community Action Group section below, we will discuss how the participants set priorities and began to focus on developing goals and action plans.

How to Access What’s There

Throughout the forum process, we continuously discovered that resources often existed that people were unaware of and did not know how to access. A common dialogue would be a participant at Table A saying, “What we really need is X” and a participant at Table B saying, “I think X is available if you call such and such.” Often times the issue becomes one of knowing what is available and how to “navigate” the system. Finding the needed information or service can present a complex and difficult web that may require more knowledge and more persistence than the average person possesses. When asked where community members would most likely turn for information, the following suggestions were offered:

- Have “Saturday’s in the Park” where you distribute information
- Need a community channel
- TV advertising
- Start a house-to house campaign like political campaigning
- Flyers and programs
- Parent information – newspapers, churches, monthly meetings
- Break the cycle, take individual control of your actions
- Need a centralized group to coordinate – a driving force for change
- Public Service Announcements (PSA’s) using local “star power”; show the trajectory of life from age 5 as you grow older, show the impact of obesity
- Start with young children
- Return home economics to schools

Complicated searches and stumbling blocks can be demotivating and may prevent people from taking action. Ease of access to publically promoted information and person-to-person assistance when needed were considered hallmarks of usefulness.

Challenges and Obstacles

With a view towards addressing some of the deficits identified by the forum participants, we asked that they identify some challenges to living a healthy life and maintaining a healthy weight within the county. Following are the obstacles cited:

- Lack of motivation
- Family traditions
- Stress – environmental, mental, and financial
- Portion sizes
- Hard to find a place to eat a balanced, healthy meal
- Mind set
- Think we are supposed to weigh more
- Economic status
- Eating habits and cooking styles
- Education levels
- Walking conditions – lack of or poorly maintained sidewalks
- The people around you
- EBT cards full of chips and junk food – the community or government is feeding the problem - why not just for healthy food?
- Overly processed foods like cold cuts
- Couch potatoes
- Healthy eating costs more
- How educational material is delivered – need greater focus on the method, not just the facts
- Need parental participation – how to cook, how to garden
- Excuses – sometimes it is “easier” to make excuses
- Frequency of fast food eating
- Heritage of cooking/eating
- Lifestyle – families do not sit down to eat together
- Economics – folks working 2-3 jobs; eat what you can get your hands on
- No longer shamed about being heavy – pretty clothes in big sizes

Understanding and addressing potential roadblocks will help pave the way for a healthier future.

COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS

At the final forum, we asked participants to consider the “Three Wishes” identified at the earlier forum and determine two or three projects that the community could and should

accomplish. From the priorities established in this discussion we would form community action groups to tackle the identified projects. Forum participants identified the following three areas as their top priorities:

- **Walking Programs**
- **Healthy Cooking Classes**
- **Sporting Programs for Children**

Throughout the process that led to the establishment of community action groups we stressed that success would only come if the community took responsibility for and leadership of any potential projects. The projects would not be university driven; our intent was to facilitate a process, engage the community, and offer guidance when possible. Day-to-day development and long-term sustainability would only come through community ownership.

To that end, we conducted a “Moving from Talk to Action” workshop subsequent to the establishment of the community action groups. The workshop brought interested individuals together and aided each group in establishing goals and action plans.

EARLY SUCCESSES

This is a preliminary report. The work of the community action groups has just begun. Early successes include community walks held in Indianola and in Drew. Drew, a town of approximately 2,500 people had 125 people attend their first walk! The county looks forward to future successes.

Seventeen Sunflower County individuals attended the Healthy Lifestyles Volunteer training. They will be delivering presentations to other community members on such topics as Portion Size Control, Eating out Smart, Eating Healthy on a Budget, and Starting and Sustaining a Walking Program.

NEXT STEPS – WHAT YOU CAN DO

Numerous ideas came out of the forums. Though community action teams formed around only a small number of those ideas, hopefully, the remainder will not be lost.

Individuals, civic or faith-based groups, school classrooms, workplace organizations and government leaders can review the “Three Wishes” list and consider where they might be able to contribute to the health of the Delta and efforts to combat obesity. The list is far from exhaustive and the interests and talents of those considering working to impact the issue might envision other possibilities. A church might consider holding a series of Healthy Covered Dish Nights with a recipe exchange or a walking challenge between Sunday school classes. A civic organization might work with local restaurants to sponsor a Healthy Taste of Sunflower County event or develop a community garden and involve youth in learning about the fun of gardening and the nutritional benefits of the planted produce. Local businesses may find ways to

encourage employee exercise – be it lunch time walking groups or after work sports opportunities.

Sunflower County has many fine attributes that benefit its residents. Never the less, opportunities to improve individuals' quality of life and, thereby, that of the community as a whole, are plentiful. By reducing obesity, you will impact the incidence of diabetes, high blood pressure, strokes, and heart disease. We hope you will join in the effort to make Sunflower County a place for a healthy future.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Mississippi is the most obese state in the nation
 - 35.4% % of the state's adults are estimated to be obese
 - 32.3% of adults reported doing no leisure time exercise or physical activity in the past 30 days
 - 35.8% of MS high school students are overweight or obese (county level information is not available)
- 40% of the adult population of Sunflower County is estimated to be obese

Get Healthy, Trim Down Delta a Preliminary Community Report for Sunflower County was prepared in late spring 2011 by the following Mississippi State University Extension Service *Get Healthy, Trim Down Delta* team members

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Throughout the preparation of this report no attempt was made to modify or filter the opinions, suggestions, and concerns voiced by the forum participants. We appreciate the participants' involvement, celebrate the successes that have come from their initial dialogue, and hope that their voice will be an impetus to additional actions that support combating obesity and supporting a healthy future for the Delta

For additional information or assistance in joining one of the established community action groups, please contact the project leader, Dr. Bonnie Carew at bcarew@ext.msstate.edu

Get Healthy, Trim Down Delta is a project developed and delivered by Mississippi State University Extension Service. The Delta Health Alliance is gratefully acknowledged for support of the project through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Grant Number U1FRH07411. The Delta Health Alliance is a non-profit organization based in Stoneville, MS that advocates, develops, and implements collaborator programs to improve the health of the Delta through the support of partnerships that increase access and availability of health care, conduct and apply health research, or offer health education programs that foster healthy lifestyles for Deltans. For more information about the Delta Health Alliance visit www.deltahealthalliance.org

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