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Sandra H. Sulzer

Utah State University, sandra.sulzer@usu.edu

Stacey MacArthur

Utah State University, stacey.macarthur@usu.edu

Zurishaddai Garcia

Utah State University, zuri.garcia@usu.edu

Christine E. Jensen

Utah State University, christine.jensen@usu.edu

Suzanne Prevedel

Utah State University, suzanne.prevedel@usu.edu

Maren Wright Voss

Utah State University, Maren.Voss@usu.edu

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Scaling Community Health Coalitions: The Well Connected Communities Pilot Initiative

Abstract

We outline the process and development of the Well Connected Communities health initiative as undertaken in three Utah communities. This transformative community-focused alternative to addressing public health issues through Extension situates local communities as the origin for health decision making. The initiative recognizes the need for varied community statuses (i.e., *planner*, *implementer*, and *innovator*) based on varying levels of readiness and diversity of populations. We concluded that the Utah Well Connected Communities initiative aligns well with the 2014 Extension Committee on Organization and Policy National Framework for Health and Wellness. Replication requirements and implications for other Extension programs are presented.

Keywords: [opioids](#), [wellness](#), [community health](#), [youth](#), [4-H](#)

Sandra H. Sulzer

Assistant Professor of Health and Wellness
Director of the Office of Health Equity and Community Outreach
Utah State University
Logan, Utah
sandra.sulzer@usu.edu
[u](#)
[@DrSulzer](#)

Stacey MacArthur

Extension Associate Professor
Utah State University
Logan, Utah
stacey.macarthur@usu.edu
[@4hvolpro](#)

Zurishaddai Garcia

Extension Assistant Professor
Utah State University
Kaysville, Utah
Zuri.garcia@usu.edu

Christine E. Jensen

Extension Associate Professor
Utah State University
Castledale, Utah
christine.jensen@usu.edu

Suzanne Prevedel

Extension Assistant Professor
Utah State University
Roosevelt, Utah
suzanne.prevedel@usu.edu

Maren Wright Voss

Professional Practice Extension Assistant Professor
Utah State University
Provo, Utah
maren.voss@usu.edu

Introduction

In 2014, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy introduced and disseminated a national framework for health and wellness (Braun et al., 2014). Soon after, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation partnered with Cooperative Extension and the National 4-H Council to launch a community-based health initiative known as Well Connected Communities (WCC). This initiative was designed to launch, grow, and sustain health coalitions to conduct needs assessments, develop action

plans, and transform communities. Utah State University was one of the first five pilot-funded institutions.

Each institution selected three communities designated as *planner*, *implementer*, and *innovator* for implementing the WCC initiative. The labels reflect increasing levels of community readiness in terms of community health coalition infrastructure. Planner communities were required to develop a coalition and conduct a needs assessment. Implementer communities were to grow a coalition and complete a needs assessment and action plan. Innovator communities did all of the above and executed an action plan while also training volunteers.

Here we outline the implementation and outcomes of the Utah program. We identify challenges, solutions, and results that occurred in the communities related to the process of establishing, growing, and sustaining health coalitions at different levels of readiness. Lastly, we provide experience-based guidance for others wishing to further the work of operationalizing Extension as a backbone for health promotion (Parisi et al., 2018).

Program Launch

Our team comprising a health and wellness specialist, a 4-H specialist, and four faculty members with health and wellness expertise reviewed competitive WCC applications from interested Utah communities. The three counties selected were distinct with regard to cultural, demographic, and geographic characteristics, and each had a unique self-selected health focus. We placed the majority of grant funding at the county level, including funding for half-time local coordinators, recognizing that community efforts should be led from within.

Community-Building Process

The starting point, challenges, and solutions for each county are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1.
Community Characteristics

County	Readiness level	Health focus	Context	Challenges	Solution(s)	Results
Emery	Planner	Opioids	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Second highest in number of opioid-related emergency department encounters (Harrison, 2017) Fourth highest in number of people who have died from opioid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stigma pervaded community efforts. Community awareness of the issue was limited. Grant administration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnering with a neighboring county's coalition efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Held coalition kickoff meeting by May 2018 Placed naloxone kits in every school and county office

			poisoning (Harrison, 2017)	was a new process.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held a drug take-back event
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No programs or coalitions to address opioid misuse 			
Uintah and Duchesne	Implementer	Diabetes prevention and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Native Americans disproportionately affected by type 2 diabetes • Lacking in health programs that engage youths along with adults, which are particularly effective among Native Americans (Chambers et al., 2018). • Youth perspectives lacking in preexisting coalition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nonnative staff and position turnover impaired connecting with local youths. • Youths attend multiple schools in a broad geographic area. • Few native youths participate in traditional county 4-H clubs. • Very few native volunteer leaders were in place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring of a local member of tribe to bring coalition back on track • Prioritizing professional development for new staff in general Utah 4-H methodology, 4-H Healthy Living programming, and Youth Mental Health First Aid program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with municipal and tribal leaders to create a walking path for safe exercise • Expanded youth-led focus to include creating commercial tobacco policies for the Ute Tribe and mental health
Davis	Innovator (changed to Implementer)	Latino teen mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Third most populous county; 10% Hispanic/Latino • Well-established community health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latino needs had not been defined. • A strong stigma exists around the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjusting strategies to include youth and adult guidance on culturally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shifted to Implementer level midyear, as determined with national

coalitions	topic of	responsive	grant
	mental health	practices	evaluators
• Suicide prevention identified by county as a top priority	in the Latino community.	• Highlighting Latino advisory council work at coalition meetings	• Working to provide community education nights to increase mental health awareness
• Mental health services often not effective without culturally responsive approaches (Gary, 2005)	• Existing coalitions were not focused on being culturally responsive.		• Added equity advisory council to new 5-year community health improvement plan to improve culturally responsive practices

Implications for Extension

Replication requirements based on our experiences are outlined in Table 2. Elements covered by state infrastructure or matches, versus what was provided through grant support, are explained. Overall, communities at varying levels of readiness required different levels of support and achieved different goals.

Table 2.
Replication Requirements

Program need	State infrastructure	Grant support
Personnel	2.0 full-time-equivalent match	National evaluator
Funding	County travel budgets	\$89,000
Partners	Community coalitions, 4-H youths Extension field staff buy-in	Technical support Professional development trainers

	National 4-H
	Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Online resources Master Health Volunteer Program (MHVP) ^a	Well Connected Communities dashboard Community health rankings

^aOur MHVP is online; some states may offer training in person. Selected MHVP modules are available for download from the Well Connected Communities national leadership.

Every community was successful in securing additional external funds to continue its work, ranging from state and regional support to funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and U.S. Department of Agriculture. The successes and challenges of our implementation of this initiative have implications for others in Extension:

- National and local health prevention issues have a place in Extension programs.
- County Extension faculty have the capacity to lead the creation of or enhance existing coalitions that address local health priorities through youth–adult partnerships.
- Creating dialogue among community members and health organizations and agencies leads to more culturally responsive and sensitive prevention/intervention programming.
- Extension can provide community health coalitions with a network of community contacts, meeting and event facilities, educational resources, needs assessments, grant writing support, budgetary support, professional guidance, and mentorship.
- Those resources Extension can provide may lead to new community partnerships, including with behavioral health agencies, hospitals, law enforcement, criminal justice units, and many others.
- In our tribal community, our team struggled to move forward until we had a local cultural guide coordinating efforts, and in Davis County efforts stalled until members of the Latino community were more fully brought into the existing health coalition. Having personnel who can serve as community-relevant cultural guides is a key to success.

The Utah Well Connected Communities launch suggests that the Cooperative Extension System is ready to partner on public health initiatives on a larger scale. Scaling that work to the readiness of individual communities is a key to success. Communities new to this effort may require more resources and more substantial support to achieve their goals; conversely, the payoff to working in these communities may be more pronounced once a coalition is established.

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