



Twin Counties tackle nutrition problems with support from the Office of Economic Development

In the Twin Counties region, healthy food is physically accessible — but that doesn't mean residents are eating it, according to a recent analysis completed by Virginia Tech's Office of Economic Development.

This finding is from one of two Office of Economic Development reports commissioned by the Mount Rogers Health District (MRHD) as part of its comprehensive, 15-month project, the Community Partnership for Healthy Mothers and Children Project, funded by the national Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program.

The project aims to improve nutrition and chronic disease specifically in Carroll and Grayson Counties and the City of Galax, rather than all eight of the counties the MRHD oversees. "Of all of our counties, those three counties needed the most attention" because of low nutrition rates, high obesity rates, and low breastfeeding rates, said Lakesha Butler, health educator for the MRHD.

In response, the Community Partnership for Healthy Mothers and Children Project set up three initiatives in the area: the Healthier Corner Stores Initiative, the potential creation of a farmers market, and a breastfeeding campaign.

"That area definitely fit the category for what the National WIC Association grant was targeting," said Caroline Jackson, wellness coordinator for the MRHD. "It was a great choice because we really had a lot of cooperation and teamwork that made the project possible. It was like all the pieces of the puzzle just fit together there."

For the Healthier Corner Stores Initiative, the Office of Economic Development created a business plan and implemented a pilot program that helps convenience stores stock healthy food products. After being covered by local news station WDBJ7, the two pilot stores, Hillsville Family Mart and Rixey's Market, saw a rise in sales of healthy grab and go options and have since held promotional health fairs. Seeing the success of the initiative, several organizations outside of the area have also requested information on starting similar initiatives elsewhere.

The Office of Economic Development also researched the feasibility of a farmers market in downtown Hillsville. Currently, the farmers market is seeking grant funding using the insight from the feasibility study.

The report's insight has also been shared with several market managers throughout the Twin Counties. This has helped "strengthen the Galax and Independence markets," Jackson said, allowing them to pursue health-related demonstrations and workshops.

The breastfeeding campaign has also enjoyed success in the region, with the creation of an informative breastfeeding brochure, four nursing rooms throughout the local school system and hospital, and a media campaign in theatres. The campaign has also started taking their mobile breastfeeding unit to local festivals and events.

Jackson says she has learned from the project, and wants to apply that knowledge to other areas. "All of these great initiatives we've begun, we do not want them to end," she said. "It's been one of the most rewarding projects that I've ever participated in."

To learn more about the Mount Rogers Health District, visit <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/lhd/mtrogers/>. For more information about the Office of Economic Development's study, please contact Sarah Lyon-Hill at sarahlh@vt.edu.

