

Get Healthy, Trim Down Delta
A Preliminary Community Report for
HOLMES 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, 42% of the adult population of Holmes County is obese. The challenge for Holmes, 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 Holmes 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 Holmes 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 Lexington Multipurpose Complex. 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 adults from across the county attended the first forum, and thirty-four attended the second.

Subsequent to the forums held with adults, a single forum was held with twenty-seven high school students. The students, all participants in the Mississippi State University Extension Service's 4-H Leadership for Life program, came from four of the county's high schools. Many of their opinions coincided with those of the adults; however, in the "Findings" section below, responses unique to the youth group follow the adult comments. Though the youth were not asked to participate in the community action groups, they were provided information on the groups and their opinions were provided to the adult groups.

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 Holmes 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 Holmes 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

Adults:

- Fresh fruits and vegetables are available
- Lexington Farmers' Market
- Mississippi Food Network
- Nutritious meals for older residents – churches hold Senior luncheons

Youth additions:

- School cafeterias selling healthier foods

Exercise and Recreational Options

Adults:

- Mallory Clinic exercise room
- Holmes County School District exercise rooms (including after-school hours)
- Walking groups in Durant
- Walking tracks at library and hospital
- Aerobics classes in churches
- Holmes County State Park –nature, trails, paddle boats, fishing

Youth additions:

- School gyms, for students and open to the public
- Exercise equipment
- Aerobic classes
- Karate classes
- Playgrounds for kids
- Pickens walking track

Education

Adults:

- Diabetes education (Health Care Management Solutions)
- Kids in the Kitchen (MSU Extension Service)
- Extension Service healthy eating and exercise programs
- Food Safety and Nutrition program (Health and Human Services)

Youth additions:

- Schools encourage healthy eating
- Seeing statistics, knowing how serious health issues are

Programs and Projects

- Boys and Girls Clubs in Lexington
- Holmes County TRIAD
- Community health fairs
- WIC program

Other

- Wellness policies
- Sidewalks around the Lexington Square
- Mississippi Healthy Students Act

The forum responses are not an exhaustive list of the assets supportive of addressing obesity within Holmes 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:

- Families to eat dinner together
- School gardens
- Home Economics back in schools
- Physical education daily class in schools
- More physical activities outside school setting
- Mandatory education with EBT (electronic benefits transfer cards associated with SNAP/food stamps program) cards & restrict purchases
- Restrict availability of unhealthy foods
- More availability of healthy foods
- Expand Farmer's Market

- Limit children's choices on cafeteria line
- More money to provide public park
- State funding for streets and sidewalks (16.6 miles of needed sidewalks)
- Incentive funding for another grocery store
- Open air fresh market (sell more than produce)
- Flexible work hours to help mothers; time pressures make it difficult to prepare healthy food
- More people knew about the things that do exist (example - Lexington Boys and Girls Club open till 7:00)
- More activities for older citizens
- Common activity areas for adults and family
- Public exercise area with trainer
- Everyone would eat breakfast
- Healthy restaurant
- Healthy lifestyle education vs. weight loss education
- Program to learn how to plan and cook healthy meals
- Promote and support diabetes training program
- Backyard gardens
- Increase community use of CSLC PEP/Strategic Tactics of Obesity Reduction in Youth Learning Program ---www.communitystudentlearning.org
- Dialogue with parents about healthy eating
- Public outreach

Youth additions:

- More businesses focusing on health issues like obesity
- More recreational centers
- Find ways to motivate people to exercise more
- More required exercise classes at school
- Reduce video games and TV time – tell youth to go outside and play
- More community sports programs
- A local gym without a membership fee

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:

- Community festivals with healthy eating focus
- Advertise in existing media –TV community board
- Target churches and advertise in casinos, PTA’s, Twitter, Facebook
- Change culture by targeting youth – 3-5 year olds, go to pre-K and Headstart
- Involve children in planning
- Educational blitz
- Children are an untapped resource in change
- Strong collaboration with schools and community
- Need to communicate changes from Mississippi Healthy Students Act – changes that already exist in the schools
- Community awareness days
- “We have more time than anything else” – major resource
- Healthy Choice Cook Off contest, recipe exchange, prizes
- Talk show on local radio and TV
- Flyers at churches, community centers
- Give children choices about where to eat
- Children’s clubs/organizations – healthy choice concession stand
- Community meetings/health fairs
- Eat healthy foods at fast food locations
- Billboards in and out of Lexington

Youth additions:

- Have a community wide walking marathon
- Initiate a community-wide meeting on obesity
- Schedule public educational talks
- Offer health and health care camps during the summer
- Community sports events
- Facebook and text messages
- Have award ceremonies for people who are doing well – spotlight healthy examples

Complicated searches and stumbling blocks can be demotivating and may prevent people from taking action. Ease of access to publicly 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 physical activity outside of school
- Failure to draw relationship between obesity and health outcomes
- Use of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)
- Healthy foods - don’t know how to buy or prepare
- Ease of access to unhealthy foods
- Positive role models not highlighted
- Absence of healthy supermarkets

- No support groups
- Fast pace of life – lack of time – may be working 2 or 3 jobs
- Need volunteers in school to help with exercise programs
- Lack of communication about healthy eating
- Fast food restaurants vs. home cooked healthy
- Working parents too tired to cook
- Lack of insurance – don't go to the doctors to learn
- Time spent on video games
- Mental health issues – high rate of depression; people apathetic, worn down
- 22.5% unemployment rate
- Lack of education
- Lack of participation in what is available
- All good cooks!
- Food is a social activity
- Don't understand portion sizes

Youth additions:

- Fried foods served at home
- Parents do not encourage kids to exercise and play
- Excessive holiday eating
- Excessive snacking
- Lazy lifestyle
- Low self-esteem, not enough confidence
- Cheap prices for junk foods
- People do not know how to cook healthy
- Time in front of video games and television
- Limited school sponsored sports – do not have baseball
- Do not like the taste of healthy food
- Knowledge problem – people do not know what is healthy eating
- Lack of encouragement to exercise from friends and family
- Transportation
- School limits access to weight room
- Food makes you sluggish – do not feel like exercising
- Do not have time to exercise
- Some people think they are too good to exercise
- Some people think they are healthy, but they are not

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

COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS

At the final forum with adults, 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:

- Common Gardens
- Family Dinners
- Physical Activities outside school setting

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 securing four locations within the county for establishing community gardens and plans to develop partnerships with the Boys and Girls club and a local youth mentoring program to involve youth in the garden effort. The county looks forward to future successes. As this is being written, soil samples were being taken from the Durant garden location in advance of spring plantings!

Six Holmes 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 work with one of the planned community gardens 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.

Holmes 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 Holmes County a place for a healthy future. In doing so, please closely review the comments of the county's youth. Habits and expectations surrounding eating and exercise are being formed now that can, positively or negatively, impact their health, quality of life, and lifespan as they mature. They are asking for adult encouragement.

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 our adults reported doing no leisure time exercise or physical activity in the past 30 days
 - 35.8% of Mississippi high school students are overweight or obese (county level information is not available)
 - Over 50% of the state's children in grades 4-7 are overweight or obese

- 42% of the adult population of Holmes County is estimated to be obese

Get Healthy, Trim Down Delta A Preliminary Community Report for Holmes 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

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