

Get Healthy, Trim Down Delta
A Preliminary Community Report for
CARROLL 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, 35% of the adult population of Carroll County is obese. The challenge for Carroll, and other 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 Carroll, Holmes, Leflore, and Sunflower 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 Carroll 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 Carroll 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 October, 2010, two public forums were held at the Carrollton Community House.. 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? Twenty-four individuals from across the county attended the first forum, and twenty 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 Carroll 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 Carroll 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

- Healthier school menu choices
- Farmers' Market in Vaiden promotes fruits and vegetables
- Removal of fried foods and changing vending machines to have healthy snacks

Exercise and Recreational Options

- Parks and Recreation Department is working on nature trails in Vaiden and North Carrollton
- Informal walking groups in Vaiden
- Mitch's Gym
- First Place and weight and exercise programs at churches
- Physical education required in schools
- Summer sports leagues
- High school gym used for tournaments and wellness activities

Education

- MSU Extension Service programs
- Diabetic and high blood pressure classes at the library
- Master Gardeners programs at schools on fruits and vegetables

Programs and Projects

- Food and nutrition programs
- WIC program

Other

- Mallory Clinic – Health clinic and wellness activities

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

- Provide more education in elementary and pre-k
- Provide more opportunities for exercise and recreation
- Education about fad diets
- YMCA or public facility in area with low to no-cost exercise programs
- All churches or every entity with kitchens to start cooking classes
- Hear the effects of bad choices (personal statements)
- Local store for healthier food choices
- Home Economics back in schools
- Health education in schools
- Males in mandatory home economics classes
- Support group
- Reward program for losing weight
- More advertisement about 4-H program (wide range of knowledge available)
- Home economics back in schools
- Public lighted walking track
(surfaced-measured)
- Vaiden track needs to add lights
- Carrollton needs a total track (maybe do in conjunction with schools)
- Combine various church exercise classes
- Develop Wellness Center—(gym in Vaiden available)
- Family Exercise Night
- Combine information on fad diets and hearing the effects of bad choices

The “wishes” are listed as they were recorded with no attempt at prioritizing or critiquing. 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:

- Educate about negative aspects
- Organize to reach people through the churches
- Establish a train the trainers program and do outreach through churches
- Aggressive advertising campaign – involve programs like Master Gardner and 4-H
- Grass roots organizations, churches, PTAs, civic groups
- Proclamation of unity between various Carroll county communities
- Involve all churches to set aside a Sunday to address obesity
- Radio
- Community newsletters like MSU Extension Service's
- Health fairs
- Television
- Community billboard
- County websites

Complicated searches and stumbling blocks can be demotivating and may prevent people from taking action. Ease of access to 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:

- Economic situation – costs more to select and prepare healthy foods
- Fast paced lifestyle –easier to use pre-packaged foods
- High tech world – children's "play" becomes screen focused
- Fast food advertising
- Traditional foods do not promote health
- Transportation – need a way to get to grocery store, distance to a walking track
- People drive to work – when they get home it's late, have to prepare dinner, be sure homework is completed – no time to exercise
- Education – people do not know what is healthy or how to read food labels
- Mind set, culture
- Local grocery stores have limited choices
- Some people unable to exercise
- Social functions where people strive to have lots of food that might not be healthy
- Stress, peer pressure
- Television – kids do not go outside and play they sit in front of the box
- Mama working, does not have time to cook traditional meal
- Play may be restricted because of safety issues
 - Safety issues viewed differently; sometimes overly protective restricts activity levels

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 two areas as their top priorities:

- **Provide more opportunities for exercise and recreation**
 - **Public, lighted, measured, walking tracks**
- **Put Home Economics back in the school curriculum**

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. Through the efforts of one group, an abandoned high school gym is now being used to encourage local walking. Funds for basic maintenance and utilities were bequeathed to the community and now the gym sponsors morning and early evening walk times for the community. Approximately 15 people are walking every morning and 5-10 each evening. The program has just recently begun and the mayor of this town of 880 people has asked what a reasonable goal for participation should be; they are now focused on the idea of a “10% Club” as a preliminary goal and are beginning to look for grant opportunities to purchase exercise equipment. In both Vaiden and Carrollton funds are available for outdoor walking paths and the community action group members have met with local supervisors to make these paths a local priority.

Six Carroll 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 Mississippi 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 Carroll 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.

Carroll County has many fine attributes that benefit its residents. Never the less, opportunities to improve individual’s 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 Carroll 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)
- 35% of the adult population of Carroll County is estimated to be obese

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

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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