



County Booster

Mixing New Federal Funds, Local Leadership

By **Matt L. Ottinger**

It's no secret: Indiana has an obesity problem. A recent report titled "F as in Fat: How Obesity Threatens America's Future 2010," ranked Indiana (with Georgia and Pennsylvania) as the 17th most obese state, noting 28.1% of Hoosiers are overweight. That's the bad news.

The positive side of the equation is that Indiana was easily in the top 10 of America's fattest states earlier in the decade. It would seem momentum is headed in the proper direction, and the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH) is striving for a slimmer Indiana. One initiative has been to provide two counties with federal grant funds from the Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) program administered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"When the opportunity for funding was announced, ISDH asked for letters of intent from Indiana communities," says Melissa Dexter, ISDH communications coordinator.

She explains that seven communities submitted letters and detailed applications, and an internal review committee chose Bartholomew and Vanderburgh counties as the top prospects.

"It wasn't based on obesity statistics alone, but rather on local capacity, existing coalitions and leadership support," Dexter relays. "The chosen communities had to be ready to implement policies and at a place where they were able to hit the ground running."

In all, \$2.1 million was awarded to Bartholomew County's Healthy Communities Initiative (HCI), while Vanderburgh's Welborn Baptist Foundation received \$2.5 million.

Years in the making

Beth Morris, director of healthy communities for Columbus Regional Hospital (CRH), contends the hospital's longstanding efforts helped the county receive the grant.

"I think Bartholomew County was funded in large part because the hospital funded (HCI) back in 1993," she offers. "Since then, we have had a collaborative planning process in our county where pretty much every sector is at the table making decisions about what the health priorities are in the community."

Morris says that because the hospital has a long history of working with local schools, the business community and not-for-profit service organizations, the county application was looked upon favorably for CPPW funding.

In Vanderburgh County, the Welborn Baptist Foundation is leading the way, which

coincides with a project it was already working on called the move•ment Initiative.

“Welborn basically wrote the application for Vanderburgh (County) with permission from the Vanderburgh County Health Department,” conveys move•ment Initiative Director Andrea Hays. “The foundation has led the charge on this because there wasn’t necessarily one organization that could singularly address the growing obesity epidemic and lack of physical activity and poor nutrition.”

Hays explains that Welborn is focusing on enhancing wellness in both the community and school system. The foundation itself touches 14 counties (although only Vanderburgh is being targeted with these grant funds).

Business buy-in

Businesses in both counties are playing key roles in program implementation – through direct partnerships, serving on leadership teams or allowing employees to benefit from these efforts.

“We have a strategy to try to make breastfeeding easier to do for mothers in the workplace,” Hays notes. “We’re working with worksites to be breastfeeding friendly (via a sub-grant with a local women’s hospital), so we’re able to provide them with the equipment to make it possible to have a private area for moms.”

She adds that the program is helping purchase bike racks for businesses and encouraging more activity in general. More complete streets (designed with pedestrians and bikers in mind) are a primary goal in each county.

“We’re also providing signage for businesses to post in high (foot) traffic areas to encourage employees to take the stairs instead of the elevator,” Hays offers, labeling such signs as “point-of-decision prompts.”

With food options being a key focus, hospitals in both counties now offer healthier entrees at discounted prices. These choices are also available to the general public. Furthermore, the move•ment Initiative is helping one local store better serve

its patrons.

“We’re working with a small corner store in a very underserved neighborhood to help offer produce, which is something (the owner) hasn’t done before,” Hays explains, noting that service is expected to begin in August. “At this point, this area doesn’t really have much access to produce, so we’re working with the store owner to provide equipment and the refrigeration unit and the design and layout to get him started.”

The Vanderburgh initiative’s leadership team includes representatives from Old National Bank, Vectren, the local chamber of commerce, health systems and non-profits that include the YMCA and Habitat for Humanity. One organization represented on the leadership team is the Tri-State Business Group on Health, a member-supported non-profit designed to influence health care cost effectiveness through education. Tri-State is also working with a \$50,000 grant to develop wellness programs for small businesses in the area, although that particular grant is not connected to the federal funds, according to Hays.

Staffing support

In Bartholomew County, Morris notes that the grant has spawned video, radio and print advertising – and allowed CRH to add relevant staff, some who are dedicated to helping the business community initiate wellness plans.

“We have a full-time employee working with not only the hospital but a number of other employers on workplace wellness,” she says. “Some of those had never done any kind of workplace wellness before; some had done a little and just needed to beef it up.”

CRH also added a full-time staffer to coordinate community activities – getting more people to use bikes instead of cars, increasing the number of community gardens and making sure preschools have access to physical activity equipment and curriculum. A staff position was also created to work specifically with the two school corporations in the county to strengthen wellness policy and enhance offerings in school lunches. CRH



Bartholomew County is emphasizing getting more locally grown, fresh food to its residents. Helping students maintain community gardens and bringing farm food to the employee parking lot of Columbus Regional Hospital – the county’s second largest employer – are two examples.



Distributing free bicycle lights is one way of promoting safety and increased bicycle usage in Columbus. Children also take part in the Bike Rodeo, designed to help them improve their skills in a fun activity.

has added six staffers in all.

Vanderburgh County has also launched its “Upgrade” campaign, encouraging citizens to implement one small step in their daily routines to benefit their health (e.g. drinking water instead of soda or having dinner as a family, which research indicates can support healthier eating behaviors). The campaign’s web site also features high profile individuals in the community discussing their own personal health upgrades.

Filling in the gaps

While federal funds will be eagerly used and are much appreciated, local efforts have enhanced the process.

“We’re very fortunate that the CRH Foundation has provided acceleration dollars that have allowed us to do some things that federal dollars can’t be used for,” Morris asserts.

She says one initiative involves getting students to eat more fruits and vegetables via taste tests in schools.

“You let kids taste things they haven’t before and vote, then let the (winning foods) show up in the cafeteria,” Morris explains. “But you can’t use federal dollars (to directly buy) food, so we’ve been able to use foundation money to buy the fruits and vegetables, then the school corporation has done the preparation and (administered) taste tests. That’s allowed us to create more adventurous eaters in the schools.”

Quantifying results

All involved explain the key goals of these programs are simply to change environments and encourage healthier behavior.

“Ultimately, our goal is to reduce the prevalence of obesity in our communities, but we know we won’t be able to show that in just a two-year time period (the federal grant cycle), so we’re really working to identify and implement policies, systems and environmental changes in our communities in order to make the healthy choice the easy choice,” Dexter clarifies. “We want to increase access and decrease barriers.”

Hays concurs that, in general, success will be measured in a broad sense. Vanderburgh County has a few quantifiable goals, including bringing more produce to underserved areas and increasing breastfeeding rates (as well as having six worksites recognized as being breastfeeding-friendly). Additionally, Welborn hopes to have a municipal document requiring street refurbishing projects to consider complete street options, largely as an effort to encourage students to safely walk to school.

Morris adds that every funded community has to have an evaluation plan in place, so some results are monitored. But she says the philosophy for CPPW funds across the country has been focused on policy and environmental changes.

“In the past, efforts to get people to change behavior have not worked very well,” she asserts. “One example would be that every smoker knows that smoking is not good for them. That hasn’t changed behavior; what changes smoking behavior is increased cigarette taxes and not being able to smoke in the workplace. From that experience, we’re trying the same approach with obesity prevention – trying to make it easier to make healthy choices.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Andrea Hays, Welborn Baptist Foundation, at www.welbornfdn.org

Beth Morris, Columbus Regional Hospital, at www.crh.org

Melissa Dexter, Indiana State Department of Health, at www.in.gov/isdh

County initiatives: Bartholomew (www.whatisyourreach.org) and Vanderburgh (www.upgradenow.org)