

Get Healthy, Trim Down Delta
A Preliminary Community Report for
LEFLORE 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, 39% of the adult population of Leflore County is obese. The challenge for Leflore, 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 Leflore, Carroll, Holmes, 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 Leflore 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 Leflore 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 Leflore County Civic Center. 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? Eighteen individuals from across the county attended the first forum, and seventeen 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 Leflore 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 Leflore County to foster one's ability to achieve and maintain a healthy weight numerous examples came forth. Group responses fell into four major categories: (1) Food choices and availability; (2) Exercise and recreational options; (3) Programs and projects; and (4) Other. Examples for each category are listed below:

Food Choices and Availability

- Two Farmers' Markets
- Better eating habits at some local churches
- Change in cooking techniques in schools result in healthier options
- MS Healthy Students Act – healthier cafeteria choices

Exercise and Recreational Options

- Church sponsored annual walk-a-thon
- Parks with walking trails
- Greenwood bike racks increasing
- Lots of organized sports opportunities
- *Community for All Ages* – Itta Bena church exercise program
- New sidewalks near middle and high school
- Planned walking trail in Itta Bena
- Five gyms

Programs and Projects

- Boys and Girls Clubs
- Delta Collaborative Garden project
- Congregational nurse ministries

Other

- Greenwood-Leflore Hospital's diabetic support group
- Greenwood leash law – increases walkability

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

- Promote Walk-to-Church or Walk-to-School Days
- Promote use of exercise facilities in the churches and in schools
- Access to affordable health care for everyone
- Remove all salt from food – establish as a policy
- Education – need help in reading food labels and understanding numbers (blood pressure, glucose, cholesterol, body mass index [BMI])
- Promote healthy foods in stores
- Watch out for the white foods, certain oils
- Wellness programs at work
- Neighborhood walks
- Cooking classes for young mothers
- Healthy food choices accessible for everyone
- Community Biggest Loser
- How to prepare healthy meals for young parents
- New businesses/communities required to have healthy options
- New developments required to have sidewalks and playgrounds
- Dollar General should add fresh produce
- Increase sense of accountability/personal responsibility of individuals
- Need a buddy system for making healthy choices
- Bike trails
- Speaker's Bureau Directory
- Healthy recipes column in newspaper
- Healthy cookbook
- Bill Clinton Diet
- Obesity prevention in disability community
- Expansion of Meals on Wheels program (promotion of congregate meal sites)
- Exercise challenge programs
- Scales for 300+ pounds people
- Instructors that can help larger people exercise
- Food sales for healthier options – Have a Pic 3 for healthy fruits and vegetables
- Master Gardner seminars
- Increase WIC food pack flexibility
- Increase vegetarian diets

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, and how to promote what was available the following suggestions were offered:

- Provide advertising discount for promoting healthy choices
- Need a local champion to promote healthy choices
- Need community health workers to increase awareness (community health workers need to be paid and recognized)
- Small group meetings (Examples – before bible studies; social group meetings)
- MS State Department of Health chronic illness training – leaders from this can come back and impact others
- Networking community, church circles
- Racks in drug stores could provide weekly updates; emphasize importance of produce, nutritional information
- Newspaper articles
- Church bulletins – information and event promotion
- Housing development newsletter –include health and wellness topics
- School newsletters and website info – send something home with students every week
- Increase knowledge about organic products (pesticide concerns)
- Work with faith-based groups to increase awareness
- Work with health care system; doctors need to be better educated on nutrition and dietary guidelines
- Educate college students
- MS Valley students must do community service; utilize them as a resource to promote healthy living

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:

- Fried foods
- Culture
- “Fat and fine” – need some meat on your bones
- “Are they feeding you?” – perception of what is healthy.
- Television, technology – children’s screen time instead of outside playing
- Weather – heat
- Advertising – end of tired day take the kids to McDonalds
- Restaurants lack healthy choices
- Southern cooking is too good
- Price of food is too high
- Restaurant portions too large
- Fast food is too available
- Lack of knowledge
- Economic, financial constraints on healthy food purchases
- Safety – lack of lights, dogs make it difficult to walk
- Politics –grocery store will monopolize an area, limits food choices
- Lack of access to fresh foods and herbs
- Transportation
- Buffets/all you can eat
- Halloween – candy bars, big sacks
- Ballgames – soft drinks after the game

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:

- **Increase education on proper nutrition, healthy cooking and exercise; establish a Speakers Bureau**
- **Develop a Biggest Loser Contest**

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 development of healthy tips for newspaper publication and a start on producing a Speakers Bureau resource directory of individuals with expertise in various topics supportive of one’s ability to achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Additionally, seven Leflore 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 Leflore 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.

Leflore 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 Leflore 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)
- 39% of the adult population of Leflore County is estimated to be obese

Get Healthy, Trim Down Delta a Preliminary Community Report for Leflore 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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