**Building a Healthier Independence: inter-department collaboration with community-based organizations**

**Category:** Partnerships

**Jurisdiction Name:** Independence, MO

**City/County Manager Name:** Robert Heacock

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, two-thirds of American adults are overweight or obese, along with one-third of children. Every year, tobacco use kills over 9,600 adults in Missouri, which also has the lowest cigarette tax in the nation and one of the highest smoking rates. The City of Independence, Missouri, believes that inter-department cooperation and policy change could decrease local rates of obesity and tobacco use and drastically improve the lives of Independence residents.

In 2011, the Independence Health Department (IHD) was awarded the Social Innovation for Missouri grant from the Missouri Foundation for Health and the Community Transformation Grant from the Centers for Disease Control for the Building a Healthier Independence (BHI) project initiative. These grants have provided more than one million dollars over five years to make it safer and more convenient to be physically active, make healthy food choices, and decrease tobacco use for Independence residents. This is a community-wide intervention that addresses multiple levels of influence, including intrapersonal, social, physical, and political environments. Expected outcomes include: 1) increased use of recreational facilities, 2) increased safety and accessibility with new or improved sidewalks and a complete street policy, 3) increased healthy food choices with healthier vending options and increased accessibility to fresh fruits and vegetables, and 4) decreased tobacco use with smokefree parks and trails.

The BHI program outcomes are being measured by a series of community health assessments, the first of which was completed in September 2011. This community health assessment provided data related to health risk behaviors and chronic disease indicators among Independence residents. The assessments were mailed to one in six households in the city (approximately 8,000 households) to further identify community needs and assess the grant initiative’s impact. Over 20% of surveys were completed and returned. Thirty five percent (35%) of respondents were overweight, and 35% were obese using their reported height and weight to calculate Body Mass Index (BMI). The majority (81%) of respondents reported that they have not smoked cigarettes in the past year. Of the remaining 19% that reported that they have smoked daily or less than daily in the past year, 35% reported they do not currently smoke.

As the project lead, IHD oversees all activities related to BHI; however, the BHI project would not be possible without inter-department collaboration, which allowed IHD to leverage City funding for infrastructure projects (sidewalks, trails, etc) as required match funding to increase the grant award amount. As IHD continues to create new relationships within the community, other partners, such as local businesses, have created additional funding sources to further BHI activities. The BHI project has improved communication and collaboration among City departments and community partners by implementing quarterly partner meetings and maintaining frequent contact on joint projects. IHD has ensured that all members of the team, regardless of department, agency, or job title, understand the direction of the project and have a chance to influence activities to improve the health of residents within the community.

*Parks and Recreation Department*

Through the BHI project, the Independence Parks and Recreation Department agreed to add various safety measures to protect park patrons and expand the health and wellness opportunities beyond what was offered to citizens. Specifically, the Parks and Recreation Department has installed emergency call boxes along trails with limited access, installed GIS trail markers along select City trails, and installed smokefree park signs at playgrounds and athletic fields with plans to install signs at all City parks by 2013.

In addition, the Independence Parks and Recreation Department operates the Roger T. Sermon Center, which provides residents access to workout equipment, locker rooms, fitness classes, and a basketball court for only fifteen dollars a year. Although this is a great price for the users, it makes it difficult to provide much in the way of modern workout equipment. BHI allowed the City to purchase several new pieces of exercise equipment, provide $2,000 for memberships to low-income residents to help eliminate access barriers, renovate several rooms for a wellness center, and promote the newly acquired equipment and membership opportunities through advertisements and flyers. These changes resulted in a 36% increase in fitness memberships in the first year of the program.

To promote healthy eating, the Parks and Recreation Department partnered with IHD to encourage the City to rebid the vending contract and increase the number of healthy options available. Because of this rebid process, all City beverage vending machines have at least 50% healthy options, and all snack vending machines have at least 85% healthy options.

*Public Works Department*

The Public Works Department is working closely with City departments such as Parks and Recreation and Community Development to help increase access and safety along the streets in Independence. Public Works has enhanced safety by installing pedestrian crossings, constructing new sidewalks and multi-use trails, repainting all school crosswalks, and passing a complete street policy. Public Works also completed one sidewalk to an elementary school and two sidewalks to parks in the first year of the project at a cost of $579,000 and has plans to complete over $800,000 worth of sidewalk and trail projects in 2012.

*Technology Services Department*

The Technology Services Department has assisted the BHI initiative by creating new mobile applications on physical activity and assisting with the installation of a new interactive website. With these advances, BHI can provide assistance to on-the-go residents in finding healthy eating locations, places to be physically active, or cessation programs.

*The Independence Examiner*

The Independence Examiner, the local newspaper, has been an integral partner for the marketing campaign. The scope of the BHI project guidelines limited advertisements to smoking cessation, but, through match funds provided by the Examiner, IHD has been able to advertise healthy food choices, the farmers’ markets, active living opportunities, and a community health assessment. The match funding provided free advertising space in print and online, multiple articles, and assistance to develop a marketing campaign. This unique partnership has allowed the IHD to increase awareness of BHI, with a cost savings in excess of $15,000.

Assessing and improving the health of a community requires the assistance and collaboration of community partners. No one city department has the capacity to improve public health on a broad scale without the support and dedication of other departments and community members. BHI created a way for city departments and outside agencies to successfully work together to bring about positive influence and change in the community. The media and awareness campaigns created the means to foster collaboration among groups striving to reach the same goal: promoting active and healthy lifestyles in Independence. This program could be replicated in areas willing to seek out services and programs available within the community and commit to improving relationships among city departments and outside organizations to search for innovative measures to reach common goals to improve the health and lives of its citizens.

**Innovation Study Presentation:**

After a brief explanation of the project plan, the BHI team will conduct a virtual “trolley tour” of each project site and partner using PowerPoint photos, brief video interviews of the partners and community members, and live descriptions of the sites. The BHI team will take questions from the “passengers” (the audience) along the route and have the passengers explore mobile applications to find healthy eating destinations and local parks and trails.