

Pathways to Health

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

When on the move, it is always important to find the right pathway. Today we'll learn about an organization which is helping local communities find the right pathways – in this case, toward healthier living. It's today's Kansas Profile.

During the past two weeks, we've learned about Extension's Culture of Health initiative and local examples of initiatives to support healthy living.

Last week we learned about a food basket program in Leoti. That program was supported by a larger initiative which goes back more than ten years.

In 2007, Wichita County launched a coalition with a great purpose and a great acronym. The name was Wichita County AIM Coalition. The AIM stands for Add more fruits and vegetables, Increase physical activity, and Minimize screen time. Those are excellent goals toward which to, um, take aim.

The AIM Coalition, including K-State Research and Extension Wichita County, has been very active. They helped start the Healthy Check Challenge, began a 5K fun walk and run, purchased equipment at the fitness center, provided healthy snacks for events, supported walking trail kiosks and exercise stations, provided swimming lesson scholarships, encouraged participation in Walk Kansas, and more.

In recent years, the AIM Coalition accessed a program launched by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas. That program is called Pathways to a Healthy Kansas. Virginia Barnes is the director of Blue Health Initiatives for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas.

According to the Pathways website, this is the largest community grant program ever funded by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas. The Pathways program is to provide community coalitions with the tools and resources needed to remove barriers and engage their communities in ways that enable healthy eating and tobacco-free, active living to become a way of life.

The grant funding for each community included a coordination grant of \$100,000, with the opportunity to apply for non-competitive implementation and achievements grants amounting to an additional \$400,000. Wow.

The first round of grants were made in 2016 and included the Wichita County AIM Coalition and seven others. An additional eight coalitions were awarded grants in the second round of funding in 2017.

These grants literally span the state, from Chanute in the southeast to St. Francis in the northwest. They are supporting lots of grassroots efforts to encourage healthy living. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas also offers an online community toolbox of announcements, success stories, and helpful resources.

One example of a success story is the produce basket program in Leoti, as we featured last week. "One of the best things about this program – besides promoting healthy eating and promoting the local grocery store – is that it is proving to be replicable," said Blue Health Director Virginia Barnes.

For example: Another Pathways grant recipient, Rawlins County, chose to implement the produce basket program at Jamboree Foods in Atwood. In its first week, 95 produce baskets were ordered and the program has grown from there.

“We are proud to partner with Jamboree Foods to provide this great opportunity for our residents,” said Emily Green of K-State Research and Extension – Rawlins County. Atwood is a rural community of 1,194 people. Now, that’s rural.

“Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas is committed to the health of all Kansans,” Virginia Barnes said. “We know that access to healthy fruits and vegetables is one important way to help people live healthy lives and reduce their risk of developing a preventable condition such as diabetes or heart disease. We are thrilled to be able to support communities as they find new ways to improve the health of their residents and strengthen food access in their communities through programs such as Simply Produce,” she said.

For more information, go to www.bcbsks.com/pathways.

When on the move, it is important to be on the right pathway. We commend the Wichita County AIM Coalition, Emily Green, Virginia Barnes of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas, and all those who are making a difference by encouraging healthy behaviors in their communities. Committed individuals, local coalitions, and supportive philanthropy can help keep us on a healthy path.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.