

Community Health Visioning 2002: The Report

Sponsored by the United Way of Tri-Valley, United Way of Tri-Valley Area, University of Maine at Farmington, HealthReach Community Health Centers, Health Leaders Forum, Franklin Community Health Network, and the Healthy Community Coalition (an affiliate of Franklin Community Health Network).

Every other year health leaders in Greater Franklin County sponsor a Community Health Visioning process to build widespread consensus on priorities for improving community health. This unique process aims to engage residents and leaders alike in conversation about issues impacting health as well as the strategies available to address concerns and opportunities.

The results from each Community Health Visioning process are shared with leaders from every agency and organization providing services or outreach in the community. These organizations are encouraged to consider the priorities from Visioning as they develop strategic plans. Indeed, over the years organizations have responded with determination to the ideas expressed by the community in the Visioning. Numerous critical new services and initiatives arose as a direct result of Visioning priorities. These include the expansion of locally-based primary care and specialty physician services, development of a new state of the art dental clinic, establishment of a new mental health agency, fourfold expansion of community health education, establishment of a transportation program now providing over 700 miles per week of local transportation, and many other major improvements in the health of the community.

The fifth Community Health Visioning process of Greater Franklin County concluded on November 14, 2002, with a day long conference culminating months of planning and discussions throughout the region. The process was initiated in June with the establishment of a Steering Committee coordinated by Susan Gagnon of the HCC. Members of the Steering Committee represented a diverse range of community residents and organizations from throughout the region.

The Steering Committee established three main avenues for the community to provide input on priorities for community health in Greater Franklin County. Residents could provide input in writing by filling out a survey that was widely distributed through the Franklin Journal and Rangeley Highlander. In addition, residents could attend one of eight meetings in various regions of the area and/or the final community-wide conference. The eight regional meetings were organized by local people in the rural towns including: Farmington (3 meetings held), Jay, Kingfield, Phillips, Rangeley, Stratton, and Wilton. The final conference was held at the University of Maine at Farmington with over 150 attendees. To encourage participation, the free conference included a complementary lunch, free childcare, and opportunities to win a grand prize drawing of free heating oil.

COMMUNITY HEALTH VISIONING

Results of the Community Health Visioning 2002

The surveys that were distributed through the local press, The Franklin Journal and the Rangeley Highlander, were completed by over 500 local residents throughout Greater Franklin County. Included in this community health survey was a question on how residents perceived their community: “*What makes you most proud of your community?*” Repeatedly, community members reported how proud they were of the communities they live in and how their neighbors support one another especially in time of need.

The survey results were also helpful in determining the unique challenges and concerns in each of the communities. The second survey question: “*What would make our community healthier?*” provoked a wide range of thoughtful responses, many unique for each community. Below is a description of the top 7 priorities based on these responses and assembled by the Steering Committee on November 5, 2002.

1. MORE PUBLIC ACTIVITIES
2. REDUCE SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH
3. SUPPORT FOR HEALTHIER LIFESTYLES
4. MORE AND BETTER JOBS
5. MORE ATTENTION TO THE PROBLEMS OF TEENS
6. CLEAN UP THE ENVIRONMENT
7. OPEN A PHARMACY IN THE NORTHERN REGION

#1 More Public Activities: More recreation and after school programs; organized activities for adults, families, elders, youth; reduce rural isolation; improve public transportation

Community members voiced their concern about a lack of organized youth prevention programs and recreational activities for all members in our communities, including both elders and youth. Some of the obstacles and challenges included the role **rural isolation** plays in obtaining community and professional services. Outlying and smaller communities struggle with the lack of available community resources. Another deterring factor was the lack of transportation services, as well as the significant economic barriers that exist in all of our communities.

Since there are already numerous community resources available in our communities, it was suggested that we **utilize existing community resources**. One example could be to update the Franklin One Call Resource Directory, “For health and human services in West-Central Maine” compiled several years ago by the Healthy Community Coalition, and funded by the United Way of the Tri-Valley Area. The Franklin One Call Resource Directory is a major resource guide for community members and organizations seeking available community services in the region. The revised publication could disseminate information on already successful programs. With an updated publication, gaps in community services would be evident.

Other community members mentioned building on already existing community connectors, such as our local churches, schools and recreation centers. In order to explore program development, research should be conducted on the times and available spaces

COMMUNITY HEALTH VISIONING

within local churches that would build capacity for youth programs and provide teens with available youth prevention services. There was also a need expressed for increasing available resources for public transportation, such as Community Concepts, Western Maine Transportation, and making the transportation more available and affordable. Carpooling and volunteering may also ease the problems regarding transportation.

#2 Reduce Substance Abuse and Improve Mental Health: More law enforcement; treatment opportunities; prevention activities in schools and in the community; more counseling for people

Discussions emerged from several of the regional meetings regarding the issues of substance abuse among our youth and lack of available mental health and substance abuse services.

Visioning participants expressed the need **to expand and promote already successful programs, such as Franklin County Children's Task Force Bullying Program.** This is a program that teaches school children violence prevention and coping skills in high-risk situations.

Other suggestions included **support services that promote prevention** and educational services for both parents and children. An example would be to support existing programs, such as DARE that can provide early youth prevention. Networking with local support services at FMH and UMF and other agencies could utilize more local resources. Also, education for primary care providers and support staff can promote early detection of mental health and substance abuse issues.

Diminishing the stigma attached to receiving mental health and substance abuse services was another suggestion. Social marketing would be useful in educating the community about these issues. Another suggestion included educating our communities on issues, such as domestic violence and sexual abuse that often involve alcohol abuse.

Increased public funding for mental health and substance abuse services would aid many youth in our area.

#3 Support for Healthier Lifestyles: Reduce smoking and make it easier to eat nutritiously and exercise by having more walking paths, free indoor exercise, nutritious food at restaurants

Public education on issues relating to quality of life concerns is a major issue. In order to support our community, promotion of health issues such as stress management, nutrition, physical and mental wellness can make a significant health impact in our region. Engaging community involvement with social marketing and promoting changes in behavior, such as "It's good to be healthy", will have a long reaching effect and cultivates social change.

Healthy lifestyles can be often affected by **socioeconomic factors** that can hinder many in pursuing healthy lifestyles, or obtaining warranted health services or receiving local resources. The exploration of what socioeconomic issues and challenges exist in our region may generate more community awareness of class issues and promote a healthier community for all of us. Also exploring healthy physical activities that are at no cost to local residents, such as walking, running, cross country skiing and biking would help improve our community's health.

COMMUNITY HEALTH VISIONING

There was much discussion regarding promoting a **healthier workplace environment**. It was suggested that more work needs to be done in engaging employers and employees on problem resolution in the workplace and promoting a less stressful environment. Possible solutions include: limiting work to a 40 hr. work week and using local chambers of commerce as a way to engage area businesses in discussion of a healthier work place environment. Other options include partnering with UMF to develop a team of students that could help do some workplace education and develop workplace stress –reduction practices, (stretching, etc.)

#4 More and Better Jobs: Jobs with livable wages and good benefits that include health insurance.

Those residing in Franklin County are well aware of the economic struggles that exist throughout our region. Many household members struggle working two jobs to support their families. There is a great community need to promote more attractive jobs with livable wages, health benefits, and growth potential, without compromising our rural character. The promotion of **economic development and education** are critical issues for economic growth in the future. Local education opportunities for those residing in our region would have a major impact, as well as coordination of opportunities between local organizations such as schools, UMF and FMH.

Marketing of tourism opportunities in the beautiful region of Western Maine was strongly suggested. Supporting specific business start-ups could increase successful business ventures. More readily available **public transportation** and upgrading of our highway structure would also improve business development.

#5 More Attention To Problems of Teens: Teens are bored and do not have after school programs; There is a need to prevent and/or address substance abuse, especially alcohol abuse and crime related to alcohol/drug abuse.

Several issues surfaced with many group discussions relating to at risk teens, and the lack of after school and recreational programs services. Suggestions include enhancing and promoting youth **prevention programs**.

While many youth experience low self-esteem resulting in low aspirations, it would be of critical importance to promote youth counseling services. Already existent local resources already exist with available church space within many of our communities. The creation of community drop in center, such as the **ZONE** in Phillips, provides a safe haven for youth. Such centers can empower teens, reduce negative peer pressure, and improve self-esteem. For the same reasons, it was suggested to expand **mentoring**, bullying and teasing prevention programs throughout the greater Franklin region.

The initiation of after-school programs has the added advantage of connecting neighbors, friends and advocates to the youth they care for so deeply. The Visioning conversations encouraged collaboration of local agencies to address issues related to youth preventive services, as well as prompting our local youth to support other community members, volunteering their time to assist other families and elderly members of our community.

Finally, **encourage parental education and support** of our families to instill respect and discipline will have a long lasting result in our communities.

COMMUNITY HEALTH VISIONING

#6 Clean up the Environment: The number one priority for the three largest towns, Farmington, Jay and Wilton. Of special concern was the air pollution from the paper mills. Other problems included air pollution from the heavy truck traffic in the area, waste being left in open fields, and the use of pesticides.

Many expressed their concern about the environment, especially about the air pollution from the surrounding paper mills. Residents were also concerned about the air pollution due to the many logging trucks that travel through the area. They also expressed the need for cleaner water in our lakes and rivers.

Many community members felt that pollution restrictions are not tight enough and that **both corporations and individuals need to take responsibility for improving our environment.** Living in a healthy environment means taking personal responsibility (community & corporate) for local practices which emphasize stewardship and sustainability. We will all need to make personal changes in our lives furthering social change to make our community healthier.

It has been repeatedly mentioned that since we create too much trash, we need to encourage more recycling. Conserving natural resources and lobbying for national changes are options. The need for sidewalks, available biking paths, as well as the development of public transportation and car-pooling would make our community healthier and less polluted.

Visioning participants emphasized education as a key, such as educating our families and teachers about environmental issues relating to recycling, fuel efficiency and the availability of resources. It was also emphasized that we need to support our local agriculture and encourage safer agricultural practices and soil conservation. Visioning participants also called for promoting financial incentives to reduce vehicle emissions and industrial pollution.

#7 Open a Pharmacy in the Northern Region: People in the northern region of Franklin County generally travel to Farmington for prescriptions, which is difficult, particularly for the elderly.

Many in the northern tiers of Northern Franklin County expressed their concern regarding the limited access to pharmacy services in the region, as well as the significant distance to obtain services. There is one pharmacy north of Farmington in Rangeley, but otherwise residents make a one to two hour drive to Farmington for pharmacy services. Obstacles to opening a pharmacy include state and federal regulations, shortage of pharmacists, and the costs associated with delivering services to rural areas. Many reported the critical issue of being ill and needing prescribed medications on the same day of service.

Possible solutions consist of **already available services that could be expanded, such as:** Courier Services that may include lab runners, the Mobile Health Unit, flower service deliveries, or a volunteer program. Also using existing transportation services

COMMUNITY HEALTH VISIONING

from Western Maine, Community Concepts as well as HealthReach RSVP are other options.

The development of the 340B Federal Pharmacy program and involvement on the part of churches, food pantries, community health advocates and pharmacies are other solutions. Some community members suggested promoting mail orders & parcel service.

The next Visioning Process will take place in the fall of 2004.