

# Success Stories

## Rural Community Collaboration At Its Best!

Lori Oster

### Summary

After working together to identify resources and needs in four nearby communities, it was apparent that significant impact could be made and sustained. That was exciting news to a group of invested community members. "The collaborative effort was great," stated one member. "Sharing resources was a cost-savings plus; working toward a common vision with our neighboring towns was a great experience." These benefits are crucial for projects such as these to be successful. The survey work was the catalyst to get the four communities talking more about health-related issues. Only time will tell if this will ultimately draw the towns themselves closer together.

### Challenge

Creating change is never an easy task. Making healthy changes to policies and the environment in small rural communities can seem monumental but sometimes there is strength in numbers. That is why four small towns in southeastern South Dakota - Gayville, Volin, Wakonda, and Irene - decided to join together and apply for a community assessment grant offered by the South Dakota Department of Health (SDDOH). They used these funds to determine available resources, identify health needs and practices, and develop strategies to improve the health in all four communities. There are approximately 1,300 people in these four towns and surrounding area. They are located within a 15-mile radius of each other and are tied together through the school districts.

### Solution

The involvement of key individuals from each community was vital for the project's success. After attending a training offered by the SDDOH to learn about survey types, the coalition created their own survey using pre-existing examples and added questions to address the rural nature of their communities.

Getting a good response to the survey is crucial for reliable data. To solicit maximum response the coalition offered an incentive of \$150 in "community bucks" to one survey respondent in each of the four communities. The survey could be answered anonymously online, and a printed version was also available.



**Your Involvement is Key**  
**Getting involved and having a voice in the community helps ensure results. The coalition was pleased to find that addressing the number one complaint – “there is nothing to do” in these towns – could have a significant impact on people’s health. The recommendations, most of which could be implemented through existing community groups, required minimal cost. But possibly the most exciting concept was the possibility of the four communities working together on a larger project – a trail connecting all four communities.**

## Results

The survey was completed by approximately 20% of the population and consisted of 75 questions related to safety, physical activity, and eating habits. Extrapolation using census data, indicated the sample size as statistically reliable.

Each community had individual needs as well as a collaborative goal-to see what public needs exist, identify collaborative projects, address community health improvements, and create more opportunities for physical exercise and access to better nutrition.

Responses received from the surveys included:

- 95% feel safe in all communities;
- Most feel where they live was pleasant to walk, run or bike;
- Most felt that there is not a lot to do in these communities;
- Half indicated no access to indoor facilities for exercise;
- Rural distance did not factor into facility useage;
- 25% indicated interest in follow-up interviews or focus groups.

### Contact

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*"This is a great place to live and we feel safe here, but there's nothing to do.' This quote exemplifies the feelings of our survey-takers and gives us great guidance in where we should start -- by creating more health-related things to do in the community."*

**- Riva Sharples, Project Coordinator**

### Future Directions

After community planning discussions and analysis of the data, the following recommendations were supported:

- Access to and promotion of existing school facilities;
- Training sessions on equipment use;
- No-cost exercise classes;
- Farmer's Markets weekly during summer months;
- Extension Offices offer healthy lifestyle classes;
- Family fun nights during summer in each community to encourage family activity;
- Trail study into connecting all four communities together.

The survey yielded more information than the communities imagined possible. They learned that people living in the four communities have similar health concerns and desires. The data will help each community create its own strategic plan for health improvements. In addition, as a result of this study, the communities look to the possibility of a global plan for the entire area and the great potential to create healthy things to do in each town.