

Feeding the Residents of Hardeman County Tennessee

On October 30, 2018 Hardeman County Tennessee adopted its community health needs assessment (CHNA) developed under the leadership of West Tennessee Healthcare Bolivar General Hospital (BGH) and in cooperation with the Hardeman County Health Council (Council). Among the highest priorities identified in the 2018 and 2021 CHNA is obesity.



BGH is a critical access hospital with 25 licensed beds. A wholly-owned affiliate of West Tennessee Healthcare, BGH is governed by a separate advisory board composed of citizens from Hardeman County. Hardeman County has 25,462 residents and Bolivar serves as the county seat.



The Council is organized under the auspices of the State of Tennessee Department of Health. Its membership represents the broad interests of the community including health care advocates, non-profit community agencies, local government officials, local school districts, health care providers, faith based organizations and private businesses. Ruby Kirby, CEO, BGH is Council chair.



NEED

As reported in the 2021 CHNA, Hardeman County had a youth obesity rate of 44.2% in 2017 exceeding the state average of 39.2%. In 2018, adults had an obesity rate of 40% exceeding the state average of 32%.

Of the respondents to the 2021 CHNA, 58% reported being either overweight or obese, 14% reported that they do not have access to healthy foods (fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meats, whole grain products or low fat milk products), and 21% reported having to travel over 5 miles to access healthy foods.

Based on Feeding America estimates, almost 1 in 7 people in Hardeman County experienced food insecurity in 2019, meaning that sometime during the year they did not have access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Malnutrition contributes significantly to chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

PLANNING

The concern for the community health and food supply fostered a relationship between the Hardeman County Health Department, BGH and the Hardeman County Community Health Center. The community needed to be able to access food, especially healthy food easily and

readily. In order to improve the well-being of the community, BGH enlisted several partners to take action on two key opportunities identified by the Council in the CHNA.

First, is providing readily available resources for food systems. The second is safe exercise areas in all communities within Hardeman County. Together, these efforts will increase activity and decrease the obesity rate across the county.

ACTION

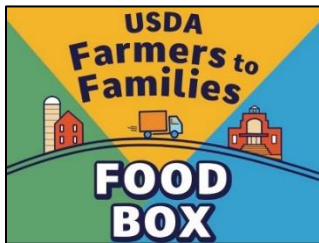


The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention funds 15 land grant universities to work with community extension services to increase access to healthier foods and safe and accessible

places for physical activity in counties that have more than 40% of adults with obesity. In 2021, the Council and Hardeman County University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture Extension received \$500,000 from CDC under its high obesity program.

Together, the Council and UT Extension are working in eight distinct communities located in Hardeman County to improve food systems; establish healthy nutrition standards in public and community institutions and food pantries; assess transportation needs and create an active living plan for each of the eight towns.

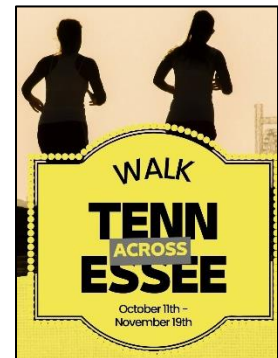
A major component of this initiative is Healthy Hardeman Outreach for Healthy Weight (H2O). Unfortunately, many retailers in Hardeman County that accept Electronic Benefits Transfer (ETB) do not sell fresh produce. H2O created a map to show where food, including fresh produce, can be accessed using EBT.



The grant allowed restaurants in the area to provide healthy food options and recruit a new grocery store in a community that once was a food desert. In addition, H2O enlisted and received support from city and county officials and stakeholders from each community to provide ideas and insights on how to address the need for healthy food and physical activity.

BHG leadership participated on many of these committees and mobilized its resources to address the need.

The Council identified the Farmers to Families Food Box Program as a priority. It was created by the USDA Coronavirus Food Assistance Program through the authority of the Coronavirus Response Act. Hardeman County participates in the Mid-South Regional Food System Plan and Mid-South Foodbank. Together with M. Palazola Produce Company, Memphis, TN, the Council established the Hunger Health and Hope Network at First Baptist Church, Middleton, TN attracting assistance from Governor Bill Lee and First Lady Maria who helped distribute food.





local farmers big and small, could leave produce in the bins for others to pick up.

Many of those in need did not have transportation, so churches across Hardeman County became the chief ally in recruiting volunteers and distributing food. Farmer's markets in various towns across the county would take fresh produce to residents. Produce bins were placed in public areas such as libraries or parking lots in small communities allowing more people to have access to fresh fruits and vegetables. In addition,



A hallmark of the effort funded by BGH is called Power of Produce (POP). Building on the Farmers Market Coalition program, the POP club provides a fun opportunity for children to engage in the local food system. In addition to participating in educational activities, POP Club kids receive vouchers to spend at the farmer's market, allowing them to make their own shopping decisions. BGH sponsored each child, age 2-10, with \$5 in POP bucks once a month to spend at the markets. This encouraged children to try new fruits and vegetables.

OUTCOME

The obesity rate in Hardeman County dropped from 40% in 2018 to 37% in 2021 for adults after three years of the program's inception. The obesity rate in students increased from 42% in 2018 to 47.9% in 2020, according to the Tennessee Public School Weight Status Data Report.

Eighteen food distributions were held that delivered over 27,640 boxes of food to the community. This also resulted in Middleton First Baptist becoming part of Memphis' Food Bank and receiving a permanent food distribution designation.

Blue Cross Blue Shield built a playground in Middleton, TN to replace one built in 1974. The estimated cost of the project was \$864,000 with a \$170,600 maintenance package.

Because of its efforts, Hardeman County has been awarded the distinction as a Healthier Tennessee Community through the Governor's Foundation for Health and Wellness.

NEXT STEPS

The Hardeman County Health Council and the H2O project is entering into its final year of the grant. Next steps include working with local industries to engage their employees in healthy eating and exercise. They also plan to engage schools by visiting classrooms and teaching children about healthy food choices and the importance of regular mobility and exercise.

In addition, the Council will increase its focus on the pediatric population in Hardeman County. The Hardeman County School system is working with the Council on projects such as work based learning, Health Occupations Students of America, water refill stations and farmers to school fresh products.

Over the next year, the Council will focus on eighth graders and above to improve the long-term health and wellbeing of the community. The Council and H2O also will raise awareness of the effects of poverty on health by conducting a Poverty Simulation for 50 community leaders.

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Rural Health Services

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