

New Madrid County Health  
Department Healthy & Active  
Communities Needs  
Assessment Strategic Opportunities

*Institute of Public Policy  
University of Missouri  
137 Middlebush Hall  
Columbia, MO 65211*



This project was funded by Missouri Foundation for Health

# New Madrid County Health Department Healthy & Active Communities Needs Assessment Strategic Opportunities

Dana Hughes, MPH

## Methodology

The Missouri Foundation for Health funded the New Madrid County Health Department to undertake an assessment and planning process during 2009. The New Madrid County Health Department conducted a survey of parents through county schools (700 respondents), a series of 11 focus groups around the county (118 participants), and an analysis of secondary data regarding the health of residents in New Madrid County to assess the needs and potential solutions regarding nutrition and physical activity among residents of New Madrid County.

Results of the data collection process were reviewed with community stakeholders in a community planning meeting in late summer. Participants at the community planning meeting were asked to provide feedback regarding potential strategies to encourage healthy eating and physical activity based on the data collected during the assessment. Those discussions as well as data analysis were used to develop the strategic opportunities summarized below. These strategies are all solid possibilities that will address needs identified through data analysis and leverage strengths of New Madrid County communities.

## Summary of Findings from Assessments

### *Secondary Data Analysis*

- 34.3% of New Madrid County Residents responded that they had no physical activity in the last 30 days compared to the state average of 25.3%
- Overweight and obesity rates in New Madrid County are 37.8% and 32.4% respectively while the state averages for overweight and obesity are 35.7% and 29.1% respectively.
- New Madrid County residents also exceed the state averages in high blood pressure and high cholesterol rates.
- New Madrid County also exceeds its region, of South-east Missouri, in all of the above mentioned categories.

### *Surveys*

- 84.4% of the residents of New Madrid county agree or strongly agree that obesity is an issue of concern for the residents of New Madrid County
- Most resident of New Madrid County feel the schools, the health department, and the parents should be responsible for promoting exercise and healthy nutrition.
- The reoccurring theme in the comment portion of the survey was the need for a new recreation facility in New Madrid County with reduced price membership or even free membership.
- Affordability seemed to play a key role in the recommended solutions, by the residents of New Madrid County.
- Community events to educate residents on proper diet and exercise were popular suggestions.
- The vast majority of children get there exercise either during PE or other school programs or playing at home

### *Focus Groups*

- The majority of the residents of New Madrid County feel that community members are not able to exercise as much as they would like or eat as health as they would like. Reason for the lack of exercise and poor nutrition are as follows.
  - o Cost
  - o Lack of exercise facilities
  - o Lack of educational resources about proper techniques
  - o Lack of transportation
  - o Accessibility and affordability to healthy foods is a problem
  - o Lack of time
- A major theme that was present through all the focus groups was community involvement. Residents of New Madrid County appear to be very willing to help each other and participate in activities together. Some activities that they mentioned as ways they are currently working to improve the health of the community are:
  - o Youth sports leagues
  - o Parks
  - o Walking trails
  - o O'Bannon community center in New Madrid
  - o Community gardens (in some communities)
  - o Farmers markets (in some communities)
  - o Church groups
  - o Health department activities
- Recommended improvements varied from community to community but the overall theme between the groups

is that anything would help. Participants were generally concerned with just improving the community as a whole. Several recommendations were:

- o An exercise facility at free or reduced price
- o A walking trail (in communities currently without a walking trail)
- o Fixing up the neighborhood parks
- o Organizing community events focused around nutrition and exercise.
- o Increased access to healthy foods at reduced prices
- o Providing transportation

- Focus group participants felt that New Madrid County Health Department's first priority should be education on proper diet and exercise techniques for adults and children. The majority of the groups felt that lack of proper education was a major barrier to proper nutrition and exercise. Community members would like to see health fairs to teach children and adults about the importance of living a healthy lifestyle. Lack of education resources appeared to be another concern for participants.

- Participants who were familiar with the current health department programs were very supportive and felt they really helped the community. Residents really liked that the church and school programs were free to the public. The only concern or complaint was the restricted hours that some of these programs are available. Another concern was that these programs are not available in every town and transportation to and from the facilities can become troublesome.

- Additional comments about exercise and healthy eating in New Madrid included such things as:

- o Making healthy food more accessible and affordable
- o More community involvement
- o Resource information, where and how the community can raise money to promote proper exercise and nutrition
- o Educational information on proper diet and exercise
- o Affordability and accessibility were constant themes throughout all the focus groups

### **Potential Strategies Developed from Community Feedback and Research**

The following section describes potential strategic opportunities for New Madrid County regarding healthy & active living.

These opportunities build on community strengths to meet the identified needs of community members who participated in the assessment. It is unlikely that all of these opportunities can be undertaken; however with guidance from staff, stakeholders, and the advisory team specific strategies can be chosen to move the healthy & active living initiative forward in New Madrid County. Additionally, while this assessment was approached in order to obtain wide-spread input from residents of New Madrid County it is impossible to uncover every good idea. Using the data collected from the assessment as well as knowledge about their communities, other strategic opportunities may be developed that are not covered in this document.

The opportunities listed are broken into three categories.

- 1) Continuing Programs
- 2) Short-Term New Initiatives
- 3) Long-Term New Initiatives

Continuing programs highlight programs in the community that are popular and are already meeting needs of residents regarding accessibility and affordability of healthy & active living initiatives. Short-term new initiatives are opportunities that New Madrid County can take advantage of with no to little additional resources since they leverage current strengths. Long-term new initiatives are interesting initiatives with great promise, but that are more resource intensive. Developing the resources to implement those initiatives may take many years if they are chosen as goals.

#### **Continuing Programs**

*School programming:* Community members who were aware of school programming support continuing to offer nutrition and exercise programming in schools. Additionally, parents report that schools are one of two top places where kids get physical activity. Finding ways to continue school programming will reach a large number of students. Additionally, more schools and enhanced programming or changes in school lunches provide opportunities in schools.

*Church programming:* Those familiar with current church programs are very supportive of continuing this program and expansion. Current leaders in church programs can serve as leaders in an expanded program for other churches in New Madrid County. Utilizing existing church infrastructure throughout the county to provide programming and facilities is a promising strategy for the community, especially given the existing capacity and success from the current church programming.

*Youth athletic programs and sports:* The need for continued support for community-based sports and activity programs was expressed. Participants in the assessment felt that existing programs were an asset in the community. Ensuring that all resi-

dents have access to these activities and a possible expansion to adult leagues were suggestions that could enhance this asset in the community.

### Short-Term New Initiatives

*Community Health Advocate Program:* Over and over throughout the assessment one of the greatest strengths of New Madrid County and its towns was the community interest in improvement from the ground up. Leveraging this spirit of community through a volunteer program presents a potential strategic opportunity. A team of volunteers from throughout the county can be developed to enhance the capacity of the New Madrid County Health Department in providing programming to enhance the health of residents. Volunteers in this program could provide cooking classes, lead nutrition education programs, lead walking groups or exercise programs, assist with community health fairs, provide resources and programs in their specific towns, provide education about healthy and active living as well as other health topics, advocate for these issues in their communities, and could potentially volunteer with other health department activities like flu vaccine clinics, etc. The exact structure and purpose of this group could be determined to fit the needs of the health department and those who may be interested in participating.

*Develop partnerships with schools, churches and community centers:* Due to accessibility and affordability issues much of the feedback from the assessment called for services in each town, rather than just in New Madrid. Building new facilities in each town is a daunting task that may not be the best use of resources; however, utilizing existing facilities to enhance accessibility will leverage another strength of New Madrid County. Towns in New Madrid County have schools, churches, and/or community centers that may provide opportunities. Schools may allow the gymnasium to be open in the evening for community members to walk inside when the weather prohibits outdoor walking. Churches or community centers may be willing to place some exercise equipment in spaces that could be utilized by community members. There may be other creative uses of these organizations for education and access to the resources needed for healthy & active living. Developing partnerships with these types of organizations will provide the opportunity to identify and act on these possibilities.

*Enhance local food systems:* Access to affordable fruits and vegetables as well as any type of healthy food is very limited in New Madrid County. Travel to Sikeston or other neighboring cities was cited as the best way to get fresh fruits and vegetables. Developing a local access point for fresh fruits and vegetables was expressed in many focus groups and the community planning meeting. Community gardens and farmers markets were both suggested for enhancing access to healthy foods.

*Nutrition programs:* In addition to farmer's markets and community gardens other programmatic ideas to enhance nutrition in the community were suggested. Cooking classes about healthy meals for one person and nutrition programs that deliver food to senior citizens who are unable to leave their homes were specifically suggested for older community members. These or other nutrition based programs to enhance the knowledge of community members were popular suggestions.

### Long-Term New Initiatives

*Continue development of walking trails in towns/communities:* Walking trails have been a popular addition to communities. They are utilized by community members, they addressed a gap in resources, and have become a very popular asset in the towns where they have been installed. Continuing to search for funding for walking trails for towns/communities that do not yet have this facility is a promising strategy. They are popular where they have been installed, and in communities without a trail, participants in the assessment felt that it would be used by community members.

*Building new fitness facilities in towns around New Madrid County:* While community members were excited to learn about the new free fitness facility in New Madrid the repeatedly asked for similar facilities in each of the towns/communities. These types of facilities are very resource intensive, but the assessment indicates that they would meet a need in New Madrid County. While current resources may not support this activity, future funding may be sought or creative solutions to provide access to physical activity in towns/communities will be well received.

### Summary

New Madrid County Missouri has many strengths in regards to healthy & active living. Community members are interested in improving their communities, initiatives are already underway in many areas, and there is a great willingness to continue and to develop programs. It is clear that people in New Madrid County are will continue to be what makes a difference in the health of their neighbors. Leveraging that strength and organizing this type of programming will help to make New Madrid County a healthy place to live.

---

Institute of Public Policy  
137 Middlebush  
University of Missouri  
Columbia, MO 65211

<http://www.truman.missouri.edu/ipp>

