

Empowering Hays County Community Leaders

Summary

Residents of Hays County face similarly high rates of obesity, diabetes and heart disease as the rest of the United States. These numbers are higher for Hispanic residents who predominately reside east of IH-35. A fourth of these Hays County residents reported being physically inactive. Improved walkability in this area could have a positive impact on the health of those who need it most, but with a lack of Hispanic, East Hays County residents, change in walkability would be difficult. The Hays County REACH Su Comunidad program conducted 3 Community Leadership Training sessions to increase capacity of leadership for members of East Hays County community members to address the issues of health in their community.

Challenge

Children in Hays County face a high burden of overweight/obesity, particularly in the eastern part of the county. Simon Middle School, located in southeast Hays County, has 17% of its students classified as overweight, and a distressing additional 37% of its students classified as obese, which sums to 54% of students being over a healthy weight for their age. Simon Middle School also has the highest proportion of Hispanic students (86%) as compared to all other Hays CISD middle schools, and 81% of its students are economically disadvantaged. Barriers to physical activity and healthy eating that contribute to the epidemic in East Hays County include: lack of awareness of resources for this community, and most important, lack of this community's Hispanic representation. Hays County REACH Su Comunidad conducted Community Leadership Training for Eastern Hays County community members that could address these community concerns.

Solution

The Hays County REACH Su Comunidad program held three Community Leadership Training sessions titled "Becoming a Leader in Your Community: A Training to Prepare Community Members for Leadership Roles." The training was conducted in Spanish- the leaders primary language. The purpose of the training series was to prepare and empower community members to participate in the leadership and governance of the community and to provide participants with the knowledge and skills to be active and engaged members of their community. Topics included Participation and Leadership in Community, Effective Communication for Leaders, and How Leaders Create a Community Project. Once the community leaders completed the training, a project addressing the health of East Hays County residents was completed.

Results

Community leaders who completed the training sessions engaged and led an additional 21 community members from East Hays County and completed a Walkability Audit along a 1.7 mile stretch of eastern Hays County. The route was selected by the team of community leaders for its potential to connect

residential neighborhoods with grocery stores, health care, and schools. The results of this walkability audit showed that the conditions for walking along this section of road in East Hays County are hazardous and do not provide a safe and inviting environment that encourages physical activity. The Walkability Audit results provide the East Hays County community leaders the data needed to provide short and long term recommendations to change making officials at the school district, city, and county level.

Sustainable Success

Because of the leadership training provided to East Hays County community members, representation of Hispanic residents of this community is recognized as imperative in improving the health of East Hays County. Additional community projects have been initiated by the community leaders in this area of the county including a corner store assessment to address accessibility and availability to healthy food options and a trash pick-up project for this area.

“I am impressed that in such a short time the community is ready to do a change in their lives. We have accomplished to have leaders from this community who attended trainings to receive the tools they need to help their communities. Before they thought that there was nothing they could do to help their community but now they have another vision totally different. They have abilities to improve their communities” Pilar Franco, REACH Promotora de Salud