

# Community Engagement Collaborative: Mobilizing Leadership and Change through Action

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## Introduction

The **Greenbrier County Health Alliance** is a non profit organization focused on partnership development and community engagement to promote lasting change. The Alliance originated from the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine, Center for Rural and Community Health with staff support from WV Clinical Translational Science Institute.

A year long planning process built trust and defined the focus on developing relationships with isolated communities to mobilize action for healthy change.

The Alliance purpose was defined to provide collaborative coordination of existing resources and develop local leadership to support people driven solutions.

## Methods

In 2016, the Benedum Foundation funded the Alliance 2 year work plan designed to develop a model for grassroots community engagement.

Community engagement strategies include:

- **Development of a Website** - To inform and engage participation
- **Asset Mapping** - Highlighting inventory of healthy assets to raise awareness and promote access
- **Self-management Workshops and Leader Trainings** - Empowering people to better manage their health
- **Community Ambassador Development** - Engaging and supporting grassroots leaders by offering education and resource opportunities
- **Mini-grants to 8 Ambassador Communities** - Two rounds of \$1000 each
- **Local Foods 'Gleaning for Seniors'** - Farmer's Market surplus gathered weekly and delivered for senior meals and Meals on Wheels

In addition, the Alliance is leading other collaborative community projects including: 'Women of the Week'; development of a mobile health unit; Workshop Wizard (data tracking for community workshops); MARVEL Early Childhood Learning Center; additional local foods collaborations; and a grant project to train leaders to conduct Chronic Pain Self Management workshops.

The Alliance approach is to develop relationships, build respect, and raise aspirations for people to join efforts to create improvements in the life of their community.

## Ambassador Community Mini Grant Projects – Round 1

Building Momentum for Healthy Change from Within Communities

**Quinwood** – Weekly Zumba classes at Quinwood Elementary were offered free to community members Through a partnership with City Hall and the Alliance. Quinwood Ambassadors attended Try This WV conference and received a Try This minigrant to expand community workshops. Nutrition education and weekly yoga classes are keeping community members engaged.

**Williamsburg** – Monthly activities that offer a range of healthy activities for all ages encourage Williamsburg community Members to get active and eat healthy. Activities include indoor walking, bike rodeo, line dancing, yoga, 'Dining with Diabetes', and nutrition workshops.

**Rainelle** – Monthly Community Gatherings at the Fruits of Labor Café offer a free meal and a chance to learn about community revitalization programs and recovery efforts from the devastating flood of June 2016 for 80 + residents each month. Additionally, Alliance leaders participated in Rainelle Local Foods Local Places strategic planning and support work plan implementation.

**Alderson** – A community Strawberry Festival highlighted locally grown produce and offered community residents, Non profits, service agencies and businesses a fun day to come together and celebrate community spirit and encourage healthy activity.

**Renick** – Removal of a wall in a small ranch house Serving as the Renick Community Center allowed them to offer self management workshops and host community events. The Renick Ambassadors are trained to engage in leading self-management workshops across the county and attended Try This Conference. One Ambassador has become an AmeriCorps volunteer at the WVSOM Center for Rural and Community Health.

**Women of Color for Change** – Ambassadors are trained as diabetes self-management program leaders and are conducting self-management workshops in minority communities. Representatives attended Try This Conference and plans are evolving to collaborate with leaders on additional projects through minority churches.

**White Sulphur Springs** – Partnership with the city officials and local famers to host a weekly Farmers Market in the center of town. Youth have been engaged to work at the market, host fun activities and are now taking leadership to organize after school activities for their peers. Additionally, WSS has participated in self management program leadership training.

**Ronceverte** - Weekly Mindfulness Sessions for first, fourth and fifth grade students at Ronceverte Elementary to teach stress management and control over emotions. A Mindfulness for Stress Reduction workshop for caregivers is planned and open free to the community. Additionally, the flood damaged Ronceverte community garden was given funds to equip high tunnel for production.

- **Ambassador Mini-grant Projects are community driven. The Alliance process draws people in to 'own' and take responsibility for what effects their lives. This is accomplished by facilitated planning; promoting resource collaboration; offering capacity building education; problem solving barriers; careful communication that builds on successes; and highlighting the strengths of people working to promote healthy change.**
- Alliance selected members of each community as ambassadors because of their interest in creating healthy change in their communities. They are offered opportunities to participate in trainings and given access to resources and support.
- Each 'Ambassador Community' successfully completed the 'round 1' mini-grant project (\$1000) and are currently planning for 'round 2'.

## Evaluation Methods

The Greenbrier County Health Alliance is documenting process steps and resources from our experience into a toolkit that can be shared with other communities interested in community engagement. Ambassador mini-grant reports will summarize accomplishments, report numbers served, funds leveraged, and changes that have evolved as a result of engagement efforts. We will attempt to capture the impact by keeping track of educational opportunities offered, new resources and systems change that occurred. We are also compiling photos and interviews with Alliance partners in the field to document the impact and capture the importance of this community engagement effort.

## Early Lessons

Engaging rural communities is imperative for improving Appalachian health outcomes. Engagement requires careful attention to building respect and trust creating relationships for mobilizing healthy action from within rural communities. The process is complex involving democratic deliberation, conflict management, education, resource connections and support.

Alliance leadership plays an important, unique role in the engagement process by recognizing strengths, creating opportunities for success and supporting energy for change.

Inclusive grassroots participation and countywide engagement of leaders builds energy, uses resources more efficiently, and leads to a more cohesive community. By supporting action over perfection the voice of the community is strengthened, efforts at change are initiated, and confidence is built so that the community can grow towards the best version of itself utilizing its current assets.

Highlighting local leadership and examples of 'regular people' contributing to community change creates momentum. When leaders' strengths are recognized and supported, they feel empowered and confident about taking action.

When community members share in the process of planning a project, commitment and ownership for the change process is developed. They engage others from their community, promoting growth from within and fostering sustainability. In this way, the Alliance promotes lasting growth through grassroots action

## Discussion

The Alliance plays a critical role for convening collaboration, facilitating discussions, developing plans to make better use of existing resources, collecting and posting information related to improving communication and engagement.

Questions yet to be determined:

- Will local leadership developed by the Alliance sustain itself over time?
- Can community engagement results be replicated in other WV communities?

## Thanks to our Funders



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