

Collaborating for Success: Bringing Stakeholders Together to Promote Food and Activity in Holyoke, MA

In 2007 the Holyoke Food & Fitness Policy Council (HFFPC), with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, set out to create a more healthy and vibrant Holyoke by developing policies and system changes that improve opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity. For Hector Figarella, project director for HFFPC, “our job is to work with the residents of Holyoke, partner agencies and city government to transform the food system and the physical activity environment. We want the community to continue to have ownership of this project as it moves forward, their input and participation are crucial to the success of the project.”

Located in Western Massachusetts, Holyoke was an industrial paper mill town for many decades, beginning in the late 1800s, attracting a mix of Irish, Polish and French Canadian immigrants. In more recent years, Puerto Rican immigrants are also settling to work in the surrounding agricultural fields. Over time, as many of the paper mills shut down, unemployment has become widespread, leaving 30 to 40% of the residents without jobs. Further, previous food crops were replaced with cash crops such as tobacco. Today, the city’s low income neighborhoods have few choices when it comes to grocery stores or fresh food. A 1,000 person survey of community residents revealed that 25% of Holyoke residents go outside the city to buy fresh food. With 60% of residents qualifying for food stamps and 70% of public school students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, food security is critical.

Despite these challenges, HFFPC’s many community-based initiatives are seeing early successes. From building a YMCA and revitalizing a landmark city-park, HFFPC is committed to community collaboration in order to advance systemic changes that build on existing community assets and networks.

An Early Success

One of HFFPC’s early successes has been improving food within the Holyoke Public School System. The Holyoke Public School System faced challenges in improving their food offerings due to budgetary constraints and the complexities of working with an external food service



provider. The food service provider was unable to purchase local food direct from the farm because there was no local purchasing preference language in the food service contract. When the time came to rewrite the bid specifications for the new food service request for proposals (RFP), Holyoke Food & Fitness Policy Council advocated for 15% local food by volume to be included in the rewrite. HFFPC worked in collaboration with the school service director, Chris Avtges, who played a pivotal role in the success of this initiative and leveraged his network to have the School Committee approve the language change. Mr. Avtges introduced a salad bar to the school cafeteria at Dean Technical High School and changed their distributor to a certified farm vendor, Nuestras Raices, an incubator farm for residents, many of whom originally came to the Northeast as migrant farmworkers. As a result, schoolchildren are eating food grown by residents in the community. Today, the school food service provider has hired an executive chef to work with the food service staff on batch preparation of healthy food from scratch and using more fresh and local ingredients in the menus.



*Members
of the
Community
Leaders
Council*

Overcoming Challenges

As HFFPC has worked to advocate for improvements to underserved areas of the community, concerns over gentrification have come up among residents. One area of focus has been Liman Terrace, one of the oldest HOPE 6 housing complexes. Residents are skeptical of changes to the built environment and are concerned that redevelopment improvements could result in attracting more affluent residents to the neighborhood, pushing out long-time residents. Additionally, residents are accustomed to discussions about city wide planning but have not seen a lot of the ideas come to fruition and therefore some residents are hesitant to participate in the planning process. HFFPC has made sure to include community members and bring them to the table to ensure their priorities are part of the outcome and that they are heard. Community voice and resident leadership remain the utmost important outcome and a key piece of the HFFPC legacy.

What works

Bringing People Together. “The beauty of food and fitness,” as Laura Pillsbury, former HFFPC project director, describes it, “is that it provides a space for people who may not have traditionally come together to discuss their vision for the community and how to work together.” These diverse stakeholders from around the community—including community residents and youth and those representing urban agriculture, city government, healthcare, and youth development—are now talking and this is how success has come about. At one

HFFPC retreat, coalition members began to discuss a community park that was not well utilized. Members of the coalition who lived in the community viewed the park as a landmark and felt connected to the park because of its long history in the community. Community residents learned about new development plans for the park from the Parks and Recreation staff and decided to get involved in these development plans. Through the HFFPC, the residents gained access to attend the city's design meetings and became collaborators in the park improvement plan; ultimately resulting in the allocation of a \$1.2 million city bond to support park improvements.

The work of HFFPC has also cultivated new multi-sector partnerships. Places like the Health Center, Inc., the YMCA, and *Nuestras Raíces* are now working together to determine the linkages between their work and how partnership can allow for a greater impact. "This new partnership encourages members to think about larger systems change and to step out of their silos," says Laura Pillsbury. Multi-sector partnership has allowed for ideas to become larger in scope and members to generate solutions that address multiple issues.

Identifying Champions for Change. In addition to the stakeholders who have eagerly come to the table to participate in HFFPC efforts, the coalition has sought out new collaborators and people who can help champion their efforts. One example of this is the school food service director who played a critical role in implementing changes to the school food program. When he was still new on the job, HFFPC members invited him to participate in a national conference where the coalition would be interacting with people from across the country engaged in improving local food systems. The school food service director met others doing this work and although he faced budget constraints and challenges left behind by his predecessor, he saw possibilities for change. He came back motivated to create change within the Holyoke school food system and has been an important collaborator in increasing access to healthy food within the school system.

Youth as Advocates. Youth have played an important role in the work of the coalition. From the beginning, it was important to the collaborative that they not just include youth in pieces of the process but that youth participate in a meaningful way and have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership. The structure of the steering committee reflects how youth participation has been made a priority. The steering committee is comprised of four community residents, four agency members, and four youth. Each steering committee member receives an equal vote and they have helped to drive the initiative and shape its direction. Youth have also been engaged in the initiative and have been an important asset to the work of the policy council. The youth members played a big part in gathering data for the community survey of 1,000 residents and have created a widespread awareness in the community about the work of HFFPC and the importance of



The mayor of Holyoke donated bikes from the police station for youth to fix up.

increasing access to healthy food and opportunities for physical activity. Youth also helped paint a picture of community health in Holyoke by capturing photographs that depict images of food and physical activity environments for a Photovoice project—these images depicting community environments that make it difficult to engage in healthy eating and physical activity helped to inform the HFFPC community action plan.

This is just the beginning for the Holyoke Food and Fitness Policy Council. Community resident and Steering Committee member, Hazel Rosario says it best: “The reason I’m so involved in HFFPC is because of love and dedication to all the children, it gives me a chance to be able to make a change for better on their behalf.” This coalition of over 70 agencies and community members remains committed to advocating for further changes to make healthy eating and active living a reality for all residents, all the while ensuring that community residents voices are heard. Says Laura Pillsbury, “This is the legacy we would like to leave.”

For more information

Visit the Holyoke Food and Fitness Policy Council at www.holyokefoodandfitness.org



This profile is part of Communities Taking Action, an online repository of profiles that showcase successful community initiatives aimed at improving health equity.

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All photos courtesy of the Holyoke Food and Fitness Policy Council.

Prevention Institute

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