



YOUTH COALITIONS PROPOSE IMPROVED CONNECTIVITY TO INCREASE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension's WOW-E program empowers youth to be a part of community engagement processes, site assessments and demonstrations, community planning efforts, and sustaining local programs and environments. In 2022, twelve youth were accepted to the WOW-E Youth Summit, a 3-day Action Institute to explore community issues and assets, learn best practices, and propose evidence-based design solutions. The Youth formed four small coalitions to propose solutions. Two groups worked to improve walkability and safety within and to parks in two communities. Another group proposed a walkability solution between a school and a convenience store. And, the fourth group proposed a walkability solution between a residential neighborhood and a dollar store that sells healthy food options. Two of the park connectivity projects have garnered initial support from local leadership. These efforts are currently moving into planning and design phases with key stakeholders and decision makers and will receive technical assistance and support from the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension WOW-E team.

"Our goal with this project is to increase walkability... and increase usage of the park, which will help improve residents' health in the long-term."

HEALTH CHALLENGE

Regional public health data indicates that 1 in 5 south Texas 11th graders are considered overweight, 1 in 6 are considered obese, and 1 in 8 are considered extremely obese. Youth photovoice assessments of their local environments identified a lack of infrastructure for safe walking as a key determinant to their physical activity and ability to get to places around town. Youth cited specific concerns including a lack of sidewalks, fear of stray dogs, issues with traffic (high speed cars), lack of shade, and little to no lighting.



“They do not teach us this stuff in school.”

APPROACH

Youth Summit participants explored their environments through pre-session photovoice assessments. During the Summit attendees:

- Learned about the obesity epidemic and chronic disease from Dr. Jacqueline White, Program Leader for Family Community Health at Prairie View Cooperative Extension,
- Discussed policy processes with Jennifer Saenz, lawyer, Texas lobbyist, and former Deputy General Counsel and Policy Advisor for Natural Resources, Water and Agriculture for two Texas State representatives, and were
- Introduced to key components of the planning process by local City Planner, Gilbert Millan, Jr.

The youth also participated in a walking audit and learned basic best practices for designing healthier communities. Participants used their knowledge to propose designs to create healthier environments in their communities; identify key partners to address these issues and sustain efforts; and create presentations and visualizations.



The twelve Youth Summit participants created four small coalitions and proposed solutions to improve walkability:

- to parks in Rio Grande City and in Garciasville/La Casita
- between a school and a convenience store, and
- to a local high school.

Two of the park connectivity projects have garnered initial support from local leadership and are moving into planning and design phases with key local stakeholders and decision makers. Technical assistance for these efforts is being provided by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension WOW-E team.



SUSTAINING SUCCESS

One effort to improve connectivity and use of the parks in Rio Grande City is being absorbed into the local park master planning process and will include a youth voice component. The proposed plan to improve access to, and use of, El Cenizo Park in Garciasville/La Casita (Starr County Precinct 3) has received verbal support from the local commissioner. The youth in this coalition are currently working with the WOW-E team to plan a mini-design charrette with local key stakeholders and decision makers. Initial analysis indicates the planned improved connectivity at these sites may collectively benefit over 2,500 local residents in these two communities.

“As part of this summit, we learned to evaluate our food and physical activity environments along with strategies to improve them through Policy, System, and Environment work.”

For more information visit

Agrilife Extension Working on Wellness Environments at wowe.tamu.edu

or check out the Youth Summit video at our YouTube Channel

[TAMU Agrilife Extension Urban and Municipal Parks](#)