Plan4Health: Thomas County Coalition

by: Sue Evans

SUMMARY
Plan4Health connects communities across the country, funding work at the intersection of planning and public health. Anchored by American Planning Association (APA) chapters and American Public Health Association (APHA) affiliates, Plan4Health supports creative partnerships to build sustainable, cross-sector coalitions. Thomas County Healthy Living seeks to adopt pedestrian friendly safe street designs; improve food and beverage offerings in schools, workplaces, and public facilities; and educate residents on their goal of being the “healthiest county in Kansas.”

CHALLENGE
Obesity is a major concern in Thomas County, KS with 32.3 percent of adults and nearly 30 percent of children being classified as obese. Income inequalities are prevalent and obesity rates are worse when comparing lower versus higher income families. Obesity is a risk factor for a number of adverse health conditions including diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. Approximately 22.1 percent of adults in Thomas County have high blood pressure and 8 percent have age-adjusted diabetes. Although 46 percent of students live within a quarter mile of school, only 10 percent walk or bike to school due to various factors including safety concerns and lack of encouragement. Throughout the county a lack of sidewalks, sidewalks in disrepair and a lack of bike paths and racks have been identified as deterrents to physical activity. Many residents depend on fast food due to the poor availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, which is also contributing to the rise in obesity.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY
To learn more about Plan4Health check out the project website (www.plan4health.us) and join the national conversation by using and following #plan4health.

SUCCESSFUL MOMENT
Like Thomas County, Colby Grade School accepted the challenge of increasing the availability of water for students by installing three water filling stations that were purchased by the school’s Parent Teacher Organization.

“Offering healthier beverage choices at County offices will set an example for Thomas County residents and aid in promoting healthy choices. This is a big step in the right direction for our community. Employees have voiced their concern about how difficult it is to make healthy choices at work, and we are taking steps to change that.”

- Mike Baughn
County Commissioner
SOLUTION
The Thomas County Coalition will create environments where the healthy choice is the easy choice for Thomas County residents. The coalition will build off of the community’s first Walking and Biking Master Plan, adopted in June 2015, by implementing a Complete Streets policy, adopting protected bike lines, and requiring developers to construct multi-use paths on future projects. Through vending and procurement policies, education, and the establishment of school gardens, the coalition will implement community-wide improvements to the food and beverage environments as well.

RESULTS
The Plan 4 Health project has been working with the Thomas County Employee Wellness Team to establish a worksite wellness program. In January 2016, the health department provided wellness labs to all county employees along with a questionnaire about tobacco, physical activity and nutrition. The anonymous results were given to the Employee Wellness Team to start the process of setting goals for the year. The Wellness Team also noticed that County employees were overweight/obese and they wanted to develop a plan to impact this health factor. Strengthening the tobacco policy, installing bike racks, increasing water consumption and developing a healthy beverage resolution were the topics for the year. The P4H Leadership Team collaborated with the American Heart Association to develop a healthy beverage resolution that the Employee Wellness Team could present to the County Commissioners. In December 2016, the Board of Commissioners passed a resolution ensuring that at least forty percent of the drinks offered in county worksites' vending machines will be healthier. These healthier options include water, diet drinks, 100% juice, and flavored waters.

Approximately 75 County employees will be affected by the resolution. Citizens doing business at the Thomas County Court House, as well as people attending court, will be affected by the healthier options available in the vending machines.

SUSTAINING SUCCESS
The P4H Team will be preparing an application to the American Heart Association for $15,000 in funding to purchase a new vending machine for the Thomas County Court House. The current machine not only is very old, but also has only soda offerings. An updated vending machine would ensure that the stipulations in the Healthy Beverage Vending Resolution are applied and that healthy options are available to County employees and citizens visiting the Court House.

The P4H Team will continue to work with the Thomas County Employee Wellness Team to make sure that the intentions of the Resolution are carried out in all County worksites. A new law enforcement facility is to be completed in the next two years, and this will be a prime opportunity to expand the Resolution to include healthy snack options as well.

Finally, the P4H Team will provide resources to the Employee Wellness Team to undertake education efforts with County employees about healthy beverages, particularly consumption of water. The Thomas County Coalition will be providing personalized water bottles as incentives for County Employees meeting the healthy beverage challenge goals they set for 2017.