Summary
Mount Rogers Health District (MRHD) used a multi-sector approach to address nutrition disparities in rural communities through the Health Access and Nutrition Development Services (H.A.N.D.S.) task force, a subgroup to the Twin County Prevention Coalition in Galax, Virginia. In an effort to increase availability and awareness of healthy food options, H.A.N.D.S. is assisting local corner stores and farmers markets in expanding their inventory of fresh produce, while creating an atmosphere that promotes healthier food choices.

Challenge
Thousands of children within the Twin Counties region (Carroll County, Grayson County, and the City of Galax) are at increased risk for poor nutrition and health conditions associated with obesity. Based on the 2013 County Health Rankings report Carroll County ranked 89th healthiest county in VA, Grayson and Galax tied at 94 out of 133 counties. Many residents in the region face health challenges such as early onset of chronic diseases related to obesity, poor nutrition, and lack of physical activity. Poor health-related behaviors are further exacerbated by poor socioeconomic factors such as poverty, limited access to healthy food and beverages, availability of transportation, as well as travel distance to local markets and community resources. Health records indicate a tremendous need for social and environmental changes that address poor nutrition as a result of lack of access.

Solution
In an effort to improve nutrition disparities in the region, H.A.N.D.S. has formed community partnerships with local agencies, farmers markets, and corner stores to encourage food choices that optimize infant, child and adult health and development. During the 15-month project period, H.A.N.D.S. Healthy Corner Store initiative has increased availability of fresh produce and healthy snack options in rural convenience stores, worked with Farmers’ Market Managers to increase public awareness of fresh, locally grown produce, and have provided community partners with Cooking Matters at the store.
Results

The efforts of H.A.N.D.S. have inspired new partnerships with local businesses and agencies such as Virginia Cooperative Extension and the Twin County Regional Hospital. The on-boarding of 2 convenience stores to the H.A.N.D.S. on Convenience Healthy Corner Store Network has increased owners' capacity to sell and market healthier choice, as well as sell prepackaged grab-n-go options that reduce fresh produce waste. Farmers' Market Managers and growers have received training and guidance on best practices to strengthen the market, food safety, and nutrition education at the market. The efforts made thus far is the first stage of a wide scale campaign to increase access and availability of foods rich in nutrition, promote budget friendly shopping habits, and educate the public on healthy food choices via system and environmental changes.

Sustainable Success

Moving forward, H.A.N.D.S. will continue to collaborate and engage community partners, allocate resources where needed, and expand on outlined initiatives. H.A.N.D.S. has developed a sustainability plan that continues to address nutrition disparities, forming partnerships with key stakeholders to address areas of need. As more convenience stores join the network, owners will be provided with training and resources to begin the first tier of a two-tier program to increase capacity to sell healthy food items. H.A.N.D.S. partners will continue to engage populations less likely to frequent the farmers' market through direct marketing and education resources that highlight the benefits of shopping and eating locally grown fresh produce.

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