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Subject: Healthy Utah Community Designation Focus Groups

Introduction

Get Healthy Utah collaborated with the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute to gain insights into municipal government leaders' attitudes and strategies regarding the Healthy Utah Community Designation. Working with staff at Get Healthy Utah and the Utah League of Cities and Towns (ULTC), the Gardner Institute developed an online survey that was distributed to city and county elected officials and their staff in Fall 2023. The results from the survey are included in the accompanying report "Get Healthy Utah: Municipal Leader Survey Results."

The Gardner Institute also facilitated three focus groups for Get Healthy Utah in Spring 2024 to gain additional insight into the Healthy Utah Community Designation. Two groups were held with "small cities" and municipalities (populations less than 10,000) and one was held with "mid-sized cities" and municipalities (populations between 10,000 and 59,000).

The small city focus groups were held on May 20, 2024, and June 4, 2024. The May 20th focus group had two participants (one from a local health department and one from a regional development agency). The participants represented regions that include both cities with the Healthy Utah Community Designation and cities without the designation. The June 4th focus group had four participants, each representing different small cities and municipalities in Utah. One city currently has the designation, and the other three do not.

The mid-sized city focus group was on May 21, 2024. The focus had four participants, each representing different mid-sized cities and municipalities in Utah. Two cities currently have the designation, and the other two do not.

It is important to note that the focus groups provided information on the experience and perceptions of the Healthy Utah Community Designation in Utah. Qualitative research aims to gain a deeper understanding of opinions and attitudes on an issue. As such, responses are more nuanced, may not be generalizable, and are somewhat determined by the flow of conversations.

Key Takeaways

Perceptions of the Healthy Utah Community Designation were generally positive. Focus group participants who have experience with the Healthy Utah Community Designation spoke very positively about it. They feel the designation helped them create stronger, healthier communities. They like the support and resources that come with the designation and appreciate the structure of the program.

One participant views the designation as an opportunity to create positive outcomes for future generations. Another participant acknowledged that the designation is really a tool for improving community health, and it is only as effective as one makes it. Two participants expressed appreciation for being recognized as a healthy community, with one specifically mentioning the pride of being featured in the video at the Utah League of Cities and Towns.

Small city focus group participants who do not have experience with the designation are interested in learning more, which was a key reason why they participated in the focus group. One of the mid-sized city focus group participants without the designation indicated they are excitedly working toward the designation, while the other questioned its effectiveness in genuinely creating more healthy communities (but also acknowledged they will likely apply for the designation).

The designation has a positive impact on community health but there may be a need to better document and measure its effectiveness. Participants mentioned several ways the designation has helped improve community health in their areas. For example, just the idea of obtaining a “designation” and creating a community health coalition promotes the importance of healthy communities and provides a platform for city officials, staff, and the general public to engage in discussions. Additionally, being able to access information and resources from Get Healthy Utah helps remove barriers and facilitate the creation of new programs.

That said, focus group participants from both the small and mid-size cities had a difficult time providing specifics on how “effective” the designation has been in promoting health in an area. This could indicate a need for more specific qualitative and quantitative measures or metrics to document and promote the designation’s effectiveness and ability to create change. However, it could also indicate that the designation has only been in these areas for a short period of time, and it is too early to speak about what has changed and its overall effectiveness.

Issues cities plan to address through the designation include:

- Increasing physical activity and recreation, with a specific focus from some cities on either younger residents or older adults.
- Promoting rec center activities and events, particularly in winter months.
- Improving mental health and well-being (participants mentioned a desire for activities that specifically focus on youth, older adults, and other diverse cultures and communities as well as that help mitigate increasing suicide and overdose deaths).
- Continuing health fairs in cooperation with other groups in the community.

- Reducing social isolation and increasing social cohesion, connectivity, and feelings of togetherness, particularly in rural and frontier areas.
- Learning about new ways and accessing resources to help create healthy populations.
- Creating and sustaining community gardens.
- Cross-pollinating resources and initiatives in the community to increase buy-in.
- Looking to secure grants to improve community health.
- Increasing general awareness and use of master trail and active transportation plans.
- Increasing access to master trail and active transportation plans by persons with disabilities and other diverse cultures and communities.
- Finding and promoting ways for people to be active as populations grow and roads become more congested.
- Implementing a community weight-loss goal as a fun way to improve overall health.

Barriers that cities mentioned to obtaining the Healthy Utah Community Designation include:

- Lack of staff time and resources (to fill out the application and execute designation plans).
- Lack of volunteers to help sustain designation programs and events over time.
- Lack of understanding and community buy-in about the designation and how it can specifically help small cities and municipalities.
- Concern that the designation may not be appropriately tailored for smaller cities and municipalities (it was noted that Get Healthy Utah should ensure the voices of these smaller areas are included in the development and promotion of the designation to promote greater participation and community buy-in).
- The information about the designation is not getting to the levels where decisions are made.

Suggested ways Get Healthy Utah could improve the Healthy Utah Community Designation:

- Create relationships and encourage city councils, local health departments, regional development agencies, local associations of government, and other entities to be Healthy Utah Community Designation champions.
- Encourage cities to work with city councils, local health departments, regional development agencies, local associations of government, and other entities during the application process and as part of the designation plan.
- Provide technical assistance and best practices on how cities can work their city councils, other city officials, staff, and the general public to create a cohesive application and plan (e.g., implement a general population survey to raise awareness and collect community buy-in and feedback).
- Promote the positives of creating a community health coalition and help cities understand the basics of the process so it does not seem daunting.
- Provide technical assistance on how to successfully implement programs to reach target audiences and create an impact.

- Provide technical assistance related to advertising and social media strategies as well as turn-key communication and marketing materials (e.g., Get Healthy Utah could partner with city councils, local health departments, and other regional entities to provide or create this information).
- Provide funding to offset staff time and to help cities create and sustain programs and resources.
- Survey cities and municipalities to better understand their needs related to community health and how the Healthy Utah Community Designation could be tailored to meet these needs (online surveys or informal surveys through presentations could also help build relationships with local officials and entities).
- Work with cities and municipalities to evaluate ways to address all levels of policies needed to promote community health.
- Continue to showcase healthy community efforts by other designated communities for ideas and encouragement.
- Offer mentorship opportunities between existing designated communities and newly designated communities.
- Involve the State Office of Education in a coordinated effort on healthy eating to ensure a more unified approach.
- Craft a PR flyer or news announcement for social media that encourages community support for the program.
- Find ways to better inform mayors, city councils, and all levels of decision-makers in local communities about the designation.