

Bringing country neighbors together for good: A rural area builds on its strengths and inspires healthy action



Healthy neighborhoods lead to healthier residents. So the S2AY Rural Health Network set out to identify the strengths the community already had—and help people do more with their existing strengths.

When you imagine a country town, you might think of farm families who eat fresh produce and spend active days outdoors doing chores, swimming in lakes and running through meadows. That may be true for some, but the reality is very different for many who live in rural communities.

They may be isolated. Their kids may be inactive. And limited economic opportunities can cause unhealthy discouragement and stress.

In rural Yates County, N.Y., where 19 percent of the 5,041 residents in the project area live below the federal poverty level, people are changing that picture from the inside out. And it all starts with residents who've been moved to action. In 2008, the S2AY Rural Health Network, a regional health agency, set out on a long-term project to help residents kick-start their community. They knew that healthy neighborhoods lead to healthier residents. Their first task was to identify the strengths the community already had and help people put their existing assets to better use.

The agency brought residents together. Helped them discover their own strengths. And Our Town RoCKS was born.

A year-long study reveals a treasure trove of local assets

Our Town RoCKS, short for “Raising our community, especially our kids, to be strong,” began with the formation of a resident-led steering committee. Along with two project coordinators hired by S2AY,

this group of 15 neighbors, or Champions, took an inventory of the local assets. They reached out to residents and compiled a list of associations and organizations that could be used to help residents realize a healthier vision for their community.

The Champions toured the area. Took notes. Drove the countryside. And most importantly, talked to their neighbors, who shared what they thought were the community's greatest strengths, from physical assets such as farmland, lakes, and libraries, to cultural, social and economic assets such as churches, festivals, school, and the Mennonite community.

The Champions sorted through the data and mapped out a plan. The strategy: to put those assets to work in ways that could ultimately improve

residents' health. With input from their neighbors, the Champions produced a short list of top health-related priorities:

- Improve personal health behavior, from eating more fruits and vegetables to increasing physical activity.
- Boost available services and access to services.



OUR TOWN RoCKS: FAST FACTS

INITIATIVE	Our Town RoCKS—Raising our community, especially our kids, to be strong
LOCATION	Towns of Barrington and Starkey and the Village of Dundee, N.Y.
YEAR LAUNCHED	2008
AFFILIATION	S2AY Rural Health Network, which connects seven counties in New York's Finger Lakes region
RESIDENTS SERVED	5,041
UNIQUE PARTICIPANTS	250, as of June 2011
EST. TOTAL ATTENDANCE	1,200, as of June 2011
ONLINE	www.ourtownrocks.org

- Add healthy activities and foods to annual community events and create new community events.
- Increase economic opportunities by stimulating small business growth.
- Beautify the community's main streets.

Once these goals were set, the Champions presented them to their community and asked each person to support the one closest to their heart. It worked—people joined the initiative enthusiastically.

Active involvement for all ages and support for entrepreneurship

To date, more than 100 people have been inspired to take a more active role in the health of their community and concentrate on these core goals. Many more support Our Town RoCKS-sponsored events with their attendance. Our Town RoCKS holds monthly community meetings, typically attended by 30 to 35 residents who provide feedback and propose ideas. Our Town RoCKS has inspired several projects and events in the community:

- The Dundee Farmers Market, now in its third season, offers residents another resource for fresh, healthy food. This well attended market sees about 70 people per week, and runs every Wednesday from June to October.
- A Dundee Main Street revitalization project to beautify the village's central area of commerce has helped restore civic pride and encourage people to stroll through their community.
- Operation Graduation provided an alcohol-free party for students celebrating graduation as a way to promote prevention of alcohol abuse among youth.

- A grant/loan program was designed to have a major economic impact through modest investment. Providing new business opportunities to residents raises spirits and provides more income, security and healthy peace of mind. If the applicant makes good on the plan for six months, half of it converts to a grant. Our Town RoCKS has so far awarded six of these grant/loans. The program serves entrepreneurs and craftspeople across a wide spectrum of interests, from a DJ to a bed and breakfast owner to a snack stand business to a rug maker.

- Pedometers for kids and adults, to inspire their interest in tracking how much they walk, and a Walk Off competition has attracted more than 100 individuals to register online.
- A pet therapy program at the Dundee Youth Center is attracting more youth, and providing a needed service to people such as local seniors and people from the ARC of Yates County. Participating kids collaborated with Junior Achievement and the Humane Society to grow the program and learn how to treat it like a real business.

A healthy new day for a countryside community

Sometimes all it takes is making a connection to assets that are already there. Our Town RoCKS has served as the catalyst to make that connection happen, and the result is new activity, new optimism, new partnerships, and healthy new opportunities for residents. The people of the Towns of Barrington, Starkey and the Village of Dundee have a

new sense of pride in where they live. They understand that where you live affects your health—and they've taken matters into their own hands. They see the local assets around them more clearly today, and they're using them to lead healthier lives.

Our Town RoCKS has only just begun. Organizers are looking out over a horizon of 10 years, and hope to lay the groundwork for healthier generations to come.

From theory to practice

People's daily lives affect their health in countless ways—from the sense of safety and connection to neighbors, to the availability of healthy food, to access to green space and fresh air. And when a neighborhood is inspired to improve from the inside out by building on their strengths rather than dwelling on needs, they can realize improved physical, social and economic health.

That's the premise of a grant program introduced by Greater Rochester Health Foundation in 2008, which ultimately funded Our Town RoCKS. The Health Foundation's Neighborhood Health Status Improvement initiative supports grassroots efforts to improve the health of people living in neighborhoods challenged by poverty and environmental factors.

Following a year-long assessment of their neighborhood, each grantee brought together residents to implement locally-based plans developed by the neighborhood itself—each one with a vision for a healthier future built on the assets they already have in their community. The program was developed with the support of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute at Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy.

CONTACT:



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To find out more about the Neighborhood Health Status Improvement initiative, contact Program Officer Maynor Gonzalez at (585) 258-1703 or mgonzalez@thegrhf.org.

