

Allina Health Neighborhood Health Connection Findings from the 2013 Health Activity grant program evaluation

The Allina Health Neighborhood Health Connection (NHC) program was created to help residents build social connections and participate in activities that encourage physical activity and/or healthy eating. This summary highlights the key lessons learned through the evaluation and offers recommendations to help Allina Health strengthen their future grant making efforts.

About the grantees

Grants were awarded to 73 organizations and groups of neighbors in Minnesota and western Wisconsin. These projects varied considerably in their structure, target population, and area(s) of focus. Most of the grantees (77%) implemented projects that used ongoing events; 14 projects implemented only one-time events. In total, 46 grantees reported that older adults (age 65 or older) participated in their activities.

6,335 residents participated in NHC-funded activities. The level of involvement among these residents and the number reached by each funded project varied considerably.

Evaluation methods and data limitations

Three data collection strategies were used in the evaluation:

- Online survey for NHC grantees
- Paper or online survey for NCH participants
- Key informant interviews with Allina Health community engagement leads

The online survey was completed by 68 of the 70 NHC grantees who implemented projects. The response rate for the NHC participant survey was much lower; 12 percent of the estimated 3,651 adults eligible to receive the online/written survey completed it. All community engagement leads (9 in total) participated in the key informant interview.

Due to the low response rate, the findings from the participant survey should be interpreted with caution, as the experiences of this small group of participants may not be reflective of all NHC participants.

Summary of key findings

Project impact: building social connections

- **Nearly all grantees indicated that their activities helped increase participants' social connections.** The grantees were more likely to rate their project as "very successful" helping participants enhance existing relationships (73%) than in building new relationships (38%).
- **The participants who completed the survey also reported changes in their social connections.** A majority of the participants reported that as a result of being involved with the NHC activity, they strengthened existing relationships (86%) and built new relationships (71%). Most participants (92%) felt they would continue to maintain these new relationships. Many participants (74%) also reported making new connections to community resources.

Project impact: improving health behaviors

- **Most grantees felt their activities led to changes in participant behavior.** Fifty percent reported they were "very successful" in helping participants increase their level of physical activity. Fewer felt that they were "very successful" in helping participants increase their knowledge about healthy living (39%), healthy eating behaviors (34%), and connections to resources (32%).
- **Results from the participant survey also suggest some individuals made changes in their behavior as a result of their participation in an NHC-funded activity.** Half of the participants reported that as a result of their involvement with the activity, they were more physically active (50%) and/or ate more health meals and snacks (51%) now than six months before.

Other key lessons learned

Projects that implemented a series of events had more success fostering social connections and supporting changes in health behavior. Grantees who implemented on-going events were more likely to report being “very successful” in helping participants strengthen existing relationships (74-77%), and increase their level of physical activity. In addition, participants who took part in at least six activities were more likely to report that they increased their physical activity (61%) and healthy eating (55-61%) than those who did not.

Although one-time events are not successful strategies for increasing social connections, they can serve an important purpose. Grantees who implemented one-time events were more likely to report being “very successful” in helping participants make new social connections (50%), increase their knowledge about health (46%), and connect to community resources (39%).

The 34 grantees who requested technical assistance found it to be helpful. The most common types of materials and supports given to the grantees included health education and promotion materials, help making connections to other organizations, and support planning, implementing, and marketing their activities. The community engagement leads who provided the support felt they had adequate time to help the grantees, but identified needs for greater coordination to identify Allina Health resources and clarification on the scope of support they can provide to grantees.

Most grantees felt that their work would continue. Although sustainability was not an expectation of the NHC funding, over three-quarters of grantees (78%) thought it was “very likely” that their work would continue.

Overall, the grantees were pleased with their experience. Most (86%) “strongly agreed” that they would likely apply for another Neighborhood Health Connection grant.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed as opportunities for Allina Health to further enhance the effectiveness and impact of the Neighborhood Health Connection program:

- Determine whether support for one-time events should be included in future NHC grantmaking efforts.
- Develop a program theory of change to focus future youth-oriented programs on activities that build neighborhood cohesion and school connectedness.
- Consider lengthening the grant period to create more opportunities for participants to be involved in ongoing activities that support physical activity and healthy eating.
- Clarify expectations about the role of community engagement leads in providing technical assistance to grantees and proactive support to potential grant applicants.
- Modify future evaluation activities to reflect any changes in NHC program scope and priorities; consider integrating follow-up activities to assess the sustainability of programs.

For more information

This summary presents highlights of *Allina Health Neighborhood Health Connection: Findings from the 2013 Health Activity grant program evaluation*.

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