

Adapting “On the Ground” Indicators in a Rural Context

The Granville-Vance District Health Department assesses indicators for healthy food access and food quality



THE ISSUE

VANCE COUNTY IS A RURAL COUNTY located in north-central North Carolina on the Virginia border. Spanning 270 square miles, Vance County has a total population of about 45,000. Vance residents live with high rates of poverty (30% of the county population with incomes below the poverty level), and a median household income much lower than that of the state (\$34,987 compared to \$46,334). The county seat in Vance is the city of Henderson.

In summer 2015, the Granville Vance District Health Department (GVDHD), conducted a comprehensive Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) for both Granville and Vance Counties. The CHNA serves as a reference for prioritizing strategic issues and describes the health status of the population, identifies areas for health improvement and determines assets and resources that can be mobilized to address public health improvement. Research has shown that in rural areas, a lack of transportation is a barrier that can make it more difficult for residents to access healthy food. County and sub-county level data previously collected by GVDHD provided information about food retail density. However, data were not available in terms of the quality of foods available nor for residents’ access to healthy food retail outlets in Vance County.

THE QUESTIONS

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP with an academic research partner, a member of the Council on Black Health (CBH) based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC -CH) Center for Health Promotion & Disease Prevention, GVDHD selected three areas outside of Henderson to examine the diversity of food access and highlight parts of the county with the greatest challenges to healthful food access. Moreover, because Vance County is a ‘majority minority’ county (i.e., African Americans represent over half of the county population), the project team was particularly interested in how food access was experienced in this context.

The GVDHD project team explored the following healthy food environment questions as part of their Environments Supporting Healthy Eating (ESHE) Community Measures Pilot Project:

- What is the neighborhood food store quality (i.e., what percent of local stores offer healthy and affordable foods?)
- How accessible are healthy food retail outlets (i.e., are those stores easily and safely accessible to neighborhood residents)?
- In a county where people have an agricultural background, are there informal systems of accessing healthful foods that don’t show up in any of the standard food access assessments that are currently conducted?

THE SOLUTION

FOR THE PROJECT PLANNING AND ASSESSMENT STAGE, the standardized ESHE Index County score and other county-specific data were utilized to paint a picture of the food environment for community stakeholders who would be trained for store auditing. Information about the ESHE Community Measures Pilot was shared via the Granville-Vance Department of Health's Facebook page, and members of the community were invited to be trained as store auditors. Individuals were recruited from in-person meetings as well. Two community sharing sessions focused on pre-testing key messages for community members (one of the many audiences the project will address) as well as determining the communication approach with store owners (e.g., what to say about the audit results).

The Communities of Excellence in Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention (CX³) Market Quality Scorecard was utilized for this project. This Scorecard is a comprehensive food environment data collection instrument developed by the Nutrition Education & Obesity Prevention Branch (NEOPB) of the California Department of Public Health (CDPH). Technical assistance for administering this instrument was provided by staff at NEOPB CDPH. Although the Market Quality Scorecard is a standardized instrument, several modifications were made to the instrument based on insights from community residents in Vance County and with guidance from the research partners supporting this project.

The food retail outlets (n=11) in the targeted assessment areas included: **1)** corner or convenience stores with and without gas; and **2)** Dollar General, Family Dollar, or Dollar Tree stores. There are no large grocery stores or supermarkets in the targeted areas. Therefore, in order to collect data for comparison pricing of fruits and vegetables, the project team conducted audits at three supermarkets in Henderson, the largest town in the county.

THE IMPACT

THE ESHE PILOT served as one of the 'starting points' for GVDHD to enhance its community engagement efforts with the African American community in Vance County. The Department of Health is hopeful that their conversations around food quality and access will lead to other discussions on issues important to this community. Another important aspect of this project was determining how the project team could add to the knowledge base on conducting this type of assessment in a rural setting. Therefore, plans are in place for cross-learning opportunities with other health departments in rural counties.

The project findings are directly supporting the following advocacy activities:

- Information about the data collection process and the food audit data collected will continue to be shared with numerous county stakeholders (e.g., as reports, briefs, fact sheets, etc.). Planned community sharing sessions will provide opportunities to build support and interests in advocacy for healthy food access in the three targeted geographic areas.
- Wider dissemination of the need for the project and the data collected were accomplished through the local community newspaper *The Daily Dispatch*.
- In fall 2015, data collected from this project supported GVDHD in receiving funding and technical assistance support from UNC-CH through a CDC-funded effort that seeks to support the implementation of evidence-based interventions (EBIs) by community organizations. One category of EBIs supported was "healthy corner/convenience stores"; three county health departments (including Granville-Vance) were accepted under this category.



“Once you leave the central hub of Vance County many residents have poor access to healthy foods. Therefore, we are working to determine ways we can partner and link mobile food markets to our health center sites.”

–TYISHA TERRY, *Public Health Education Specialist GVDHD*

For more information on Granville-Vance District Health Department visit: www.gvdhd.org

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