

Background: Romano Circle Healthy Eating by Design was an 18-month pilot project focused on Romano Circle, a public housing neighborhood of lower income residents in West Lebanon, NH. During the period of this project, 96 individuals comprising 30 families lived at Romano Circle. Sixty of these residents were children. The younger children attended Mt. Lebanon Elementary School several blocks away. A detailed record of accomplishments during the course of the project is available through Active Living by Design's Progress Reporting System (PRS). We strongly recommend reviewing the PRS entries in conjunction with reading this report.

1. What measurable goals did you set for this project and what indicators did you use to measure your performance? To what extent has your project achieved these goals and levels of performance?

The broadest measurable goals for this project are contained within the overall goal stated on the cover sheet:

- To improve the food choices made by Romano Circle residents to include healthier foods.
- To provide garden and cooking skills to Romano Circle residents.

Our indicators to measure performance included a before-and-after survey of eating habits and attitudes toward food, participation of residents in activities and accomplishment of planned tactics and benchmarks.

Major Activities. To achieve these goals, we utilized the following primary tactics: 1) Organized community meals to demonstrate healthy menus and develop skills in planning and preparation; 2) Developed a healthy food policy for community meals and other gatherings; 3) Trained cooking coaches to work with families on preparing healthy meals; 4) Led trips for residents to pick-your-own (PYO) farms and a farmers market to show where fresh produce can be obtained; 5) Introduced residents to collaborative food buying opportunities as a way to reduce expenses; 6) Hosted demonstrations of preparation and preservation of fresh produce; 7) Provided healthy menus and recipes to families; 8) Supported the development of a wellness policy at Mt. Lebanon Elementary School that addresses healthy foods; 9) Conducted taste testing and healthy food prep activities for children; 10) Developed Quests (treasure hunts) at Romano Circle and the farmers market to engage children in physical activity while learning more about food; 11) Initiated construction of a trail around the Romano Circle property to encourage physical activity; 12) Purchased a communal freezer and developed a communal food storage program; 13) Created a youth garden to teach gardening skills and provide a venue for learning about fresh vegetables and healthy eating.

Survey Results. The before and after survey results indicate that we did make progress on the above goals. For example, the percentage of respondents who said that they do not find it difficult to prepare meals with fresh vegetables increased from 42% before the project to 77% after it, while the number who indicated fresh vegetables are too expensive declined from 33% to 22%. In addition, there were increases in the number of respondents who said their children were eating fresh vegetables (36% to 50%) and canned fruits (36% to 63%).

Yet, there were inconsistencies, also. The number of days per week that respondents said their children eat 2 or more servings of fresh vegetables decreased slightly (4.4 days to 3.8 days, on average). Also, the number of respondents who said their children were eating fresh fruits declined from 93% to 75%. These seemingly contradictory results probably are the result of relatively low survey completion rates, especially for the post-project survey. Fourteen of 30 families completed surveys at the start of the project and only eight did so at the end. This problem is most clearly revealed by the decrease in the number of residents who said that they had ever visited a local farm or farmers market to buy fresh vegetables from 93% to

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78%. Obviously, since the families residing at Romano did not change, there could not be fewer families who had ever made such a visit after the project than before, even disregarding the fact that several families made pick-your-own trips to farms and went to the Lebanon Farmers Market as part of the project.

Some examples of participation rates in activities are:

Nearly half (48%) of the children at Romano Circle actively participated in the youth garden, thus learning gardening skills and gaining a better appreciation for kinds of vegetables and the connection between eating vegetables and health.

More than half (at least 57%) of the children participated in 3 or more promotional healthy snack and food preparation activities.

Almost two-thirds (63%) of the families took part in at least one pick-your-own trip or farmers market visit.

In addition to the overall goals above, the project workplan, organized around the 5 P's, included several benchmarks for assessing success:

1. Establish an RCHEbD partnership steering committee with 10 members. Success: A steering committee of more than 10 members met monthly throughout the project. Some members participated only when specific tactics were to be addressed.
2. At least 50% of children participate in at least 3 promotional healthy snack and food prep activities. Success: As noted above 57% of children took part in healthy snack/food prep activities.
3. At least 50% of families attend at least one PYO or farmers market visit. Success: Target was exceeded (63%).
4. Develop 4 Quests at Romano Circle and Lebanon Farmers Market and distribute to all families. Success: Three Quests done.
5. Utilize existing mentoring services to lead walks for children. Success: Done.
6. Healthy eating policies adopted at Romano Circle and Mt. Lebanon School. Success: Policy for healthy food at community meals and other gatherings at Romano Circle adopted. Progress made toward adopting a wellness policy for the school; policy will be adopted in the near future.
7. 15 families engage in collaborative bulk food buying and processing/storage. Success: Not successful. About three families are using the freezer, but not using collaborative buying. It appears that the typical resident family here has so much to deal with on a daily basis (child care, managing tight budget, challenges of transportation, etc.) that allocating time to organize collaborative is not a priority. In addition, for limited income families where money is very tight at the end of each month, the long-term savings from buying in bulk are not feasible in the short term. We did succeed in bringing several food retailers, including co-ops, to meet with residents to discuss what they have to offer in the way of bulk purchasing.
8. Residents and transportation service providers meet at least once to discuss options for transportation to farmers market, stores, etc. Success: Not done due to scheduling difficulties and insufficient time.
9. 20 children actively participate in youth garden. Success: Target exceeded (28 children).
10. Residents create agreement regarding communal food storage. Success: Agreement adopted for freezer use; no other communal storage currently happening.
11. 10 families use communal storage and freezer for long-term food storage. Success: 3 families using freezer; no other communal storage is taking place (see #7 above).

2. Did the project encounter internal or external challenges? How were they addressed? Was there something RWJF could have done to assist you?

The more significant challenges included:

- Getting adult residents to complete surveys for their families. As noted elsewhere, we used pre-and post-project surveys to assess our starting point with residents' healthy eating behaviors and measure our success in achieving our goals. However, we were able to obtain only about a 50% response rate on the first survey and a 26% rate on the last one, despite allowing respondents to remain anonymous. We tried to address this challenge by going door to door to encourage people to complete the surveys and offering incentives for completion.
- Varying levels of participation in activities. Some activities generated high levels of participation. For example, nearly two-thirds of the families participated in at least one PYO trip of farmers market visit. On the other hand, very few came to a meeting to talk about collaborative food buying and storage. We addressed this issue by offering incentives (coupons) for participating in some activities. In general, participation by children was easier to obtain than adult participation.
- Staff turnover among partners. During the project, we lost the Youth Garden Coordinator and a key partner representative to new jobs. Fortunately, we were able to find an excellent new garden coordinator in time for the second growing season. Although this meant that the children had to become acquainted with a new person, there was little impact on that piece of the project. The departure of the key partner had a somewhat larger impact because the organization did not hire a replacement until very late in the project. Fortunately, the individual who left was able to remain involved as a volunteer to some degree to help with the cooking coach piece of the project.
- Differing beliefs about food and "healthy eating" among staff and partners. Members of the partnership held varying opinions about the importance of food characteristics such as organic vs. not organic, fresh vs. canned, local vs. food from across the country, and whole vs. processed food. This presented both occasional challenges and opportunities for discussion and clarification within the partnership about what food was acceptable as part of the project. We resolved these through discussion among ourselves and with our project officer at Active Living by Design.
- Insufficient staff time. Despite making a budget revision to shift some funding into the Youth Garden Coordinator line, we found that we were limited in our pursuit of some objectives by still not having allocated adequate funds for project staff. This issue was exacerbated by having the one individual serving as Project Director for this project and for an Active Living by Design community partnership. To some degree, this issue was addressed by a willingness of other partners to pick up pieces and by volunteerism on the part of the two coordinators.
- Balancing quality of food with cost/value. We became acutely aware of the financial constraints residents deal with regularly, and had to become adept at seeking out the best food options for community meals that would offer good nutrition and affordability.
- Communication with residents. Most residents do not have Internet access or email, so communication is done primarily door-to-door and face-to-face.

3. Have there been other sources of support?

The only other sources of cash support for the project came from partners as follows:

- Upper Valley Trails Alliance covered travel expenses for the Project Director to attend the combined Active Living by Design/ Healthy Eating by Design grantee meeting in Denver in May 2006 (\$525.00).
- Lebanon Housing Authority paid for hardpack to surface the trail around the housing complex (\$600.00) and delivery of manure for the garden (\$150.00).

Toward the end of the project, grants were received from three other sources to continue two of its most popular elements, the pick-your-own field trips and the youth garden, beyond the project's end. These were:

- Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center - \$300 for pick-your-own trips
- Dartmouth College Health Awareness Program - \$300 for pick-your-own trips
- HNH Foundation - \$348 for garden tools and supplies

Together, these two grants will fully fund the trips during the summer of 2007.

There were numerous in-kind donations to the project. These included:

- Upper Valley Trails Alliance – office space; computer, Internet, and telephone support; printing and photocopying (including paper); miscellaneous office supplies.
- Vital Communities – office space; computer, Internet and telephone support; printing and photocopying.
- Lebanon Housing Authority – staff time (conservatively estimated at \$4,000.00); meeting space for all partnership meetings; printing/photocopying (including paper) for all resident communications and partnership meetings.
- Lebanon WIC Program – staff time; printing/photocopying.
- University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension – staff time; materials for cooking coach training.
- Lebanon School District – staff time.
- Alice Peck Day Memorial Hospital – staff time.
- Dartmouth Community Partners – staff time.
- Cedar Circle Farm – plant seedlings and compost for garden.
- Woodstock Water Buffalo (farm) – manure for garden.

4. What lessons did you learn from undertaking this project?

Some lessons learned include the following:

- 18 months is not much time to try to change the attitudes, perceptions and behaviors of people with regard to such a basic part of life as food, especially when it involves "strangers" coming in from outside. It takes time to become accepted. What really is necessary is being

present on an ongoing basis, regardless of any activities being conducted, in order to have direct contact with as many residents as possible and build relationships. Just calling meetings or passing out fliers will not yield the desired results. We came to realize that, while the garden itself was an important educational tool, it also was an "excuse" for the Youth Garden Coordinator to be there, to become accepted, and to be seen as a resource. We believe that the garden coordinator delivered services well beyond engaging children in gardening and teaching them about vegetables. She became an accessible adult, a positive role model for respectful communication and interaction, and degree of day-to-day stability that may at times be in short supply.

In addition, it takes time for people to assimilate new ways of thinking about food and its sources. Because of the challenges of communicating with adult residents, messages must be delivered through multiple channels on multiple occasions to reach them. We believe that even an additional six months would have yielded significantly enhanced results.

- Engaging children is very important and, to a surprising degree, easier than engaging adults. Children are willing, even eager, to try new activities if they seem like fun and are less set in their views toward food. They readily learn by doing and can wield considerable influence over the adults in their lives.
- A youth garden is an excellent way to engage children in learning about food. It provides many opportunities for conveying information about vegetables, nutrition and health in an informal setting. Children take considerable pride in the results of their efforts and want to inform others about what they have accomplished and learned.
- A setting like Romano Circle, a small, well-defined neighborhood with some tradition of community interaction already established and on-site staff, is well suited for a project like this one. We might not have been as successful in such a short time period in a more traditional neighborhood or larger area.
- It is important to involve residents early on in setting at least some of the agenda and objectives for a project like this. We held an initial gathering at which residents had a chance to say what they would like to learn. If time had allowed, it would have been better to do this during the proposal development phase so that the workplan could have been tailored more closely to the interests of the residents while still addressing the purposes of the project. The process of doing this is very helpful in understanding the current state of knowledge of residents and the concerns that are foremost in their minds. As examples, we learned that a top interest among adults at Romano Circle was ways to prepare healthy meals quickly AND inexpensively, and we tried to address that continually throughout the project.
- It is important to have a conversation within a partnership at the outset about what "healthy eating" means within the context of the project. If the goal is to increase consumption of vegetables and fruits, for example, it may be necessary for all to accept some compromise of their own personal beliefs to move the target population forward.

- A corollary to the two observations directly above is that it is important to understand where residents are starting from in terms of the current knowledge and behaviors as well as the realities of every day life for them. In a neighborhood of low-income people who in many cases are low on cash at the end of each month, it may not make sense to emphasize the benefits of organic produce. When both adults in a family are working at least one job, and perhaps more than one, to make ends meet, it will be challenging to get them to make trips to the farmers market very often, organize collaborative bulk food buying, or use time-consuming recipes – or even to participate in meetings. If residents have a perception that incorporating fresh vegetables into meals is difficult or expensive, it may be necessary to begin with new and easy ways to use frozen or canned vegetables.
- More specifically, PYO trips to farms have been very popular. They appeal to both adults and children and offer relatively inexpensive fresh fruits and vegetables that can be preserved in various ways for the future. We did use incentives in the form of coupons for free produce to encourage participation.
- We probably would not recommend having the same person be Project Director for two major, simultaneous projects like ALbD and HEbD, especially when one of them is an intensive, short-term pilot project.

5. What impact do you think the project has had to date? Who can be contacted a few years from now to follow up on the project?

We believe that the following have been the most significant impacts of the project:

1. Adult residents have learned the basics of what constitutes a healthy meal and have menus and recipes for health meals in hand. They also have tried several healthy dishes. Some have helped prepare healthy community meals. In the near future, some also will learn to plan a community meal with healthy food.
2. A strong tradition of community meals has been developed and a policy is in place to assure that these are healthy meals.
3. Children have learned about gardening and that vegetables from a garden are an important element of healthy eating. They have taken pride in what they have produced from the garden each of the past two summers. They also have learned much more about related and not-so-related topics (e.g., where food comes from, vegetables have flowers and seeds, cooperation, etc.).
4. Adults and children alike to developed a better sense of where to obtain healthy food (their own garden, farmers market, pick-your-own places) and that fresh fruits and vegetables are especially good tasting and good for them. Some have learned new ways to preserve fresh foods. All now have access to a community freezer.
5. Residents have enjoyed themselves in developing a Valley Quest (treasure hunt) on the grounds and helping construct the trail. This makes it more likely they will continue to use them.

As Jonathan Chaffee, executive director of the Lebanon Housing Authority, recently wrote, " I think that in a few years we could do a follow-up with the kids who participated and that they will still remember the events (the wonderful trips to pick-your-own and the farmers market) and

that if questioned they will say that vegetables and fruits taste good and are good for them, based in part on their experiences during the project."

Jonathan, who is based at Romano Circle, is the best future contact:
(lebanon.housing.authority@valley.net; 603-298-5753).

6. What are the post-grant plans for the project if it does not conclude with the grant?

As a pilot project, this project does conclude with the grant. However, we have developed a sustainability plan for certain elements of the project based on a meeting with and survey of residents to identify the parts they most want to see continue. This plan identifies circumstances under which elements may continue and resources that are available. Some key points:

1. As noted in #3, funding is in place to continue pick-your-own trips during the summer of 2007. Lebanon Housing Authority will encourage residents to plan dates for the trips.
2. Community meals almost certainly will continue. Gift cards were purchased near the end of the project to provide food for the next community meal this spring, for which the Project Coordinator will assist residents with planning. Residents then will prepare a step-by-step guide to planning a meal. Romano Circle now has a healthy food policy in place for community meals. Future meals will depend on residents taking the initiative to plan them. WIC staff is available to assist with menu development.
3. Residents want the youth garden to continue. Vital Communities will seek a volunteer garden coordinator for 2007 and may offer an intern to oversee and assist. An application for funding for supplies has been submitted.
4. The freezer is in place for continued use. Lebanon Housing Authority will develop flyers to promote its use by residents.
5. Lebanon Housing Authority will arrange for UNH Cooperative Extension to present food preparation and preservation demonstrations once or twice per year.
6. Each family has a binder containing healthy menus, all recipes tried during the project (and others), and other visual reminders about healthy eating for ongoing reference.
7. The Lebanon School District is set to adopt a healthy food policy. Alice Peck Day Memorial Hospital staff will follow up with the Mt. Lebanon Elementary School regarding refinement of the district policy for that school.
8. The trail around Romano Circle is mostly complete. Lebanon Housing Authority will ensure it is finished and plan a ribbon cutting ceremony and incentive program to promote its use.
9. Vital Communities intends develop a broader program for access to health food based on experience gained through this project. Depending on funding, this may include a regional "summit" on issues related to healthy food accessibility.

7. With a perspective on the entire project, what have been its key publications and national/regional communications activities? Did the project meet its communications goals?

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Beyond the lessons to be learned from this pilot project, as communicated in this report and at grantee meetings, this project did not have national or regional communications objectives or activities. Our communications objectives were primarily internal to Romano Circle, as evident in the project goal: *To improve the food choices made by Romano Circle, Lebanon, NH, children and adults to include healthier foods. Romano Circle residents will gain garden and cooking skills to complement an active, healthy lifestyle.* As noted in answers to the previous questions, the project did meet these communication objectives. We did have an objective of informing the surrounding community about the project. This was accomplished through a major local newspaper article near the beginning of the project, articles in partner organizations newsletters, and a display and presentation by Romano Circle children in an open house at the local elementary school.