

Healthier people make stronger families and vibrant communities.

The Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative is about people working together to create vibrant communities where the healthy choice is the easy choice. Food and fitness is important because the quality of our everyday food and fitness environments strongly impacts our quality of life. No matter where we are, the places where we live, learn, work and play affect our health.

For the past year, the Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative (FFI) has been assessing our access to healthy, local, affordable food and places to be active and play. Over 500 people in Allamakee, Clayton, Fayette, Howard and Winneshiek counties have been involved in the process which has received funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

Nationally, our current food system leaves some communities without access to affordable, healthy, locally grown food. The availability and cost of food can either encourage or discourage healthy eating. In too many rural and urban communities gas stations and ill-stocked convenience stores are the only available and affordable sources of food.

Opportunities to be active and play don't exist in every community. Low-income communities and communities of color have fewer resources and opportunities than more affluent neighborhoods and communities. Parks, recreation centers, sidewalks and safe streets do not exist in many underserved areas. When communities are denied these resources, active living choices become the hard choices.

NE Iowa FFI's vision is for Northeast Iowa to be a *unique place where all residents and guests experience, celebrate and promote healthy locally grown food with abundant opportunities for physical activity and play EVERY DAY. Healthier people make stronger families and vibrant communities.*

Food & Fitness is a national initiative of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. They believe all children deserve to grow up in places that support being healthy. Yet, children today belong to the first generation with a lower life expectancy than their parents.

The work of the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition (NIFF) initially attracted the attention of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Because of NIFF's collaborative approach, the Kellogg Foundation invited Northeast Iowa to apply.

In April 2007, the Kellogg Foundation identified Northeast Iowa as one of the nine communities to become models of change. Communities were chosen for their demonstrated commitment to collaboration and early successes at improving their food and fitness environments. The other eight communities are Boston, MA; Holyoke, MA; New York, NY; Philadelphia, PA; Detroit, MI; Tohodo O'dem Indian Reservation, AZ; Oakland, CA and Seattle, WA.

Each community received \$500,000 to spend two years creating community action plans. Plans are due to the Kellogg Foundation in August 2009. If accepted, Northeast Iowa will receive additional Kellogg Foundation funding to begin implementation.

Food & Fitness has brought people together to plan, implement and sustain improvements. These are community members who know what changes are needed to create healthy environments. The collaborative is composed of youth, nonprofit organizations, community members, businesses, education, and government.

FFI co-conveners are Brenda Ranum, Winneshiek County Extension Director, and Ann Mansfield from Luther College. The fiscal agent is Northeast Iowa Resource Conservation & Development represented by board member, Gordon Hunter.

The structure of the NE Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative starts with county planning teams co-led by county staff from public health, community economic development and ISU Extension. Community members attend monthly meetings which are open to the public. County teams view brief webcasts to learn about active living, the local food system, healthy lifestyles, and policy and system change and then discuss local implications.

A Regional Team is the decision-making entity for FFI. Each county is represented by four adults and two youth. In addition, there are three team members representing cultural diversity in the area. This group provides the overall leadership needed to work with communities to develop and implement the shared vision. They integrate efforts between the five county teams and allocate funds for the planning phase of the initiative.

An organizational partners group provides ongoing support for the county team meetings. They are a vital communication link across different systems in the counties and region. Members are the co-leaders of the county teams, the co-conveners, and initiative evaluators.

Nine regional work groups are key to getting the work done. They gather information and recommend next steps to the Regional Team. The groups are Youth, Communication, Vision Deployment Matrix (Systems Thinking), Schools, Built Environment, Community Health, Inclusive Team, Human & Financial Resources, and the NE Iowa Food & Farm Coalition (NIFF).

NIFF has transitioned from a separate entity to a work group of FFI. They continue to focus on local foods in the region to increase access to healthy and affordable food.

The Inclusive Team was created following Diversity Training led by Kellogg Foundation consultants last March. Their goal is increased participation in the initiative by underserved populations, including low-resource community members, minorities and youth. They identified four target communities (Elma, Postville, Waukon, and Oelwein) to increase local outreach and planning. They also work with minority liaisons in Postville.

Youth are offering FFI new and profound perspectives on how to improve our environments. They are passionate about increasing access to local healthy foods and increased opportunities for physical activity and play. They are launching school-based Food & Fitness youth teams this fall. Lynnette Anderson of Riceville was recently hired as the Youth Engagement Coordinator to guide this component.

Being part of the Kellogg Foundation Food & Fitness Initiative has meant being committed to process over product during the planning phase. That's hard work for action-oriented people, which is most of the people involved. To help Food & Fitness Initiatives across the country move forward, the foundation created a team of Technical Assistance Providers, dubbed the TAP team. NE Iowa has "tapped" this resource repeatedly.

The Regional Team has identified three strategies to anchor their community action plan. Guided by the NE Iowa FFI vision, these strategies build on our region's assets and opportunities. Specific tactics will be added this winter.

The first strategy is to ensure that school district policies and practices support healthy living of children, families and community members. Ensuring that fresh, local, healthy food is available and affordable in all communities, neighborhoods and institutions is the second strategy. The final one is to ensure communities have a built environment that supports abundant opportunities for physical activity and play.

Although planning is the key focus, changes are already happening. NIFF has awarded \$9000 in mini-grants to producers. This initial capital leveraged \$243,000 in local food and fiber enterprises.

More than 16 schools districts throughout the five counties are forming a Regional School Planning Team to determine ways to increase access to local healthy foods in our schools, along with spaces and places for kids to play as part of the school day. Youth team members surveyed youth and families about food choices available at school concession stands. They found people not only wanted healthier local food options, but are willing to pay more.

Community members have volunteered to complete built environment assessments of indoor and outdoor infrastructure and programming that supports active living.

Iowa State University Extension has committed additional staffing for food and fitness work. A regional farm and agricultural business management specialist provides support for business planning and start-ups, organic and food-based alternative agricultural enterprises, and financial analysis. A new state Extension Small Farm Specialist was hired in May.

Policy change is an important driver to improve our food system and built environments. Several policy changes have already occurred.

Last year NIFF discovered that local institutions were told they couldn't purchase local fruits and vegetables because of inspection rules. This was being enforced statewide, even though it was not the state's policy. It was the policy of a statewide private distributor. When brought to the attention of the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, institutions were informed that fruits and vegetables CAN be purchased locally. This includes schools, care centers and hospitals. Many local institutional buyers are again buying fruits and vegetables at Farmer's Markets or directly from local producers.

Local city councils have taken note of discussions coming out of the County Planning Team meetings and many are addressing sidewalk issues *before* the Community Action Phase commences.

The Winneshiek County Cattlemen's Association decided to support local marketing of beef raised in the county. The county group took this proposal to the Iowa Cattlemen's Association and a policy supporting "further research, development and engagement by the beef industry as local food systems and local processing grow to larger markets for our future" has been adopted.

Together, county and regional team members are developing pathways for everyone to have a voice in creating a new vision for our region. They have developed a better understanding of the connections between health, the local food system, fitness and community infrastructure, daily life, families, and policy. Community members continue to be passionate about their specific areas of interest, but are working to blend all system components into the plan.

"It has been exciting to bring together key players, not only from the local food system, but also from the health community and those involved with infrastructure to create a vision for healthier living," says co-convener Ranum. Mansfield adds "people should be proud that the Kellogg Foundation recognized our region's skills in collaboration and ability to build on community assets."

All of the initiative's work, including meeting dates, is posted at www.iowafoodandfitness.org. You can also submit your email address to your county ISU Extension office to receive meeting information as well as other resources related to the initiative.

"We encourage you to get involved and get plugged-in to create the future we want," concludes Ranum.