

Friends of Allerton build sense of community to address poverty

Nearly half the Wayne County community of Allerton, population 550, attended the town's Family Fun Day on June 8. They enjoyed a free meal and completed a survey for the "Friends of Allerton," the organizers of the event. Fun Day provided an atmosphere of celebration, a reason for people to gather and a chance to identify and increase awareness of efforts that would reduce the impact of poverty in the community.

"We planned for 200 people, even though many people told us we'd never have that many show up," said Angela Downs, a Friends of Allerton board member. "We had **over 200** people! No recent event in Allerton has gone over this big! And we got great feedback from the surveys."

They had 40 people sign up to participate in Friends of Allerton, others indicated an interested in welcoming new residents, and some were interested in community beautification projects.

The welcoming and community beautification projects were ideas generated during Horizons study circles. Horizons is a program directed by Iowa State University Extension with funding from the Northwest Area Foundation. The program guides communities in the exploration and understanding of local poverty issues and establishment of goals that move the community towards prosperity for all.

"We asked everyone to complete a survey before they ate. They had the chance to offer ideas for community projects that would make Allerton a thriving community, but we asked them to only make a suggestion if they were willing to roll up their shirt sleeves to work on the project," said Downs. "There were several very good ideas offered. We hope to fund ideas like these once we have our nonprofit status and can begin offering grants. We have the process in place to fund projects that address poverty issues and involve all income levels in the project."

Getting half the people in Allerton to participate in community events like Fun Day is easier now that there is a large town message board, the initial Horizons project, where everything from church socials to community dinners are announced. "It's easy to see what is going on as you drive down the street," Downs said. "Before we put it up, nobody knew what was going on in town. The message board reaches everyone – people who never came to events before are attending. We are really becoming a caring and connected community."

Horizons participants have given leadership to other efforts that demonstrate an increase in neighborliness and caring for the community. They brought people out to work with the fire department and first responders – cleaning up debris after a January ice storm, checking on residents stranded for days without electricity, and providing a shelter with meals. A family that lost their possessions in a house fire, benefited from the clothing drive held earlier; when they were on their feet again – they donated back to the clothing fund.

The statistics say that 18.5% of the community is living in poverty, but these days the community outreach and participation is creating a path to a more prosperous Allerton for all.

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June 2008

