

RURAL CHAMPION WELLNESS PROJECTS

MENTAL HEALTH IN MORTON COUNTY

Background Information

Being able to provide safe, confidential, unmanned space for rural community members to access mental health services at all times is essential to fighting the stigma about seeking out help in small towns. By providing different resources such as in-person facilities, tele-health options and having hotlines available, community members will have several options to use when seeking out mental health services. The hope for Morton County is to bridge the gap in the wait-time for in-person professionals while also providing other services for those who prefer not to seek help in-person or at an emergency facility.

The in-person locations will house a range of resources including Mental Health providers, Physicians, Veteran and SUD support, an AED and other materials to offer to patients. These locations will have information for community members help find food and clothing banks, Ministerial Alliance and AA groups.

Morton County is ranked eighth in Kansas for opioid vulnerability. Through local assessments there was several recent suicides identified within Morton County. Community members are losing loved ones to suicide and substance abuse which is why it's crucial to bring mental health and substance abuse services to counties like Morton. A result of opioid and suicide crisis is not only a rise in deaths but a cause of homelessness and raise crime rates through the community. These issues may seem obvious for some small communities, but the best way to identify a community's needs is through assessments.

Gaps/Barriers Identified: Capacity Barriers:

- The original provider in mind was short-staffed and unable to assist in the project. Having several options is useful in case there are similar problems.
- School was uninterested in a mentor program as it might add "another job" to the students workload.

Steps to Success

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) and Childcare Aware have researched and provide data at the state level on the mental health and substance abuse needs. In order to have a successful solution to this issue, it's important to include other resources and organizations to address this issue. It is recommended to host public meetings to ask community members about their experience and opinions on the issue. This provides the community

members with a platform to express their ideas for potential solutions. After hearing from the community, it identified that the top priority was suicide prevention with the lack of childcare following closely after. It's essential to include as many departments as possible and community areas in public conversations. Additionally, it might be found helpful to form a coalition that focuses on the specific issue or topic. Once a coalition is active, it can be used to assist in the needs assessments that will be conducted throughout the project.

The primary goal was to provide support for those who struggle with mental illness but could be afraid to seek help due to the stigma and lack of confidentiality in a smaller town. This unfortunate stigma was the motive to establish physical places for persons to seek help or reach a therapist or hotline without scheduling an appointment. With such facilities, it'll be a resource for person struggling with SUD but don't have resources to travel long distances. When there are less hurdles for a person to jump over to receive help, the likelihood of them recovering or seeing a professional is higher.

In Morton County there are three townships: Elkhart, Rolla, and Richfield. There is now a center in each one to ensure the facilities are within walking distance. In addition, providing hotlines will provide those without insurance an affordable way to receive support. Because of this, it was vital that a phone or landline was donated in order to receive those calls as they come in.

The beginning of this project started with the forming of community support and creating new partnerships while also mending any old partnerships. While doing this, it's important to keep in mind to not "overstep" and respect boundaries of providers or organizations that have been doing the work. In the situation in Morton, the provider had been short staffed, making it difficult to work together. In this scenario, it's best to seek out other providers that have the means to form partnerships.

Then physical progress followed: the more educated the community is about the issue and the project, the more people that will join to help the community. Doing so identified people who were willing to do manual labor to repair buildings for the facilities. Once there is a physical structure and the community could see the progress and improvements, more donations and other volunteers will begin to assist in the project making it a much quicker turnaround.

Success is achieved if someone who didn't have access before the centers, now has access to professionals. Regarding the timeline of the RC grant, success was measured by the ability to provide the first steps for someone needing help. Overall success was to have a whole community that is educated, stigma free and supportive of issues about mental illness. Even though the overall and timeline goal was met, that does not mean the work is completed. The next goal for Morton County is to integrate this program and assistance into schools and large employers.

Building the committee or workgroup is important to for forming a working relationship with the school(s), City Council, County Commissioners, civic organizations, healthcare providers and walk-in clinic as well as any other providers in the area and large employers if possible.

It's very useful to invite and include mental health care providers in conversations and meetings as they are an essential part to these facilities and part of solution for handling mental illness and addiction. Having these backgrounds included is crucial to the education of the community on the topic and provides everyone with the information on how to access their services.

Having a large team that involves several areas within the mental health and substance abuse realm is vital to reaching the goal of having resources for such illnesses. It's helpful to involve as many areas of the community as possible in order to reach the different audiences. When the team is large and can provide different backgrounds, it can help spread the word while changing the conversation from the "stigma" mindset to a proactive mindset.

For our community, the gap was coming from our primary mental health provider. We approached the commissioners about the issues of being underserved and this conversation took place before the provider met with commissioners to renew their contract. This gave the commissioners an opportunity to ask questions and offer some accountability before giving the provider their funding for the year. A lot of questions were answered after that meeting. It is important to check in with your commissioners/city & county officials, so they know if services are lacking. Show them your surveys and assessments, they can hold service providers accountable.

Solutions

The solution revolved around the idea that the community members would be able to access these facilities without transportation or insurance. Additionally, it was important to bridge the gap in services that are necessary for the community but were not offered in a close enough radius.

Consider there may be a need to make changes in the team members or the task they are working on. It's important to keep in mind that not everyone has the same work style or strengths—it's beneficial to be flexible in order to figure out how to lean on each different strength that members will bring to the project. For instance, if someone is not performing as well with a task, it may be best to give that task to someone else. By expanding the team and utilizing resources from the provider became fundamental to completing the project.

Engaging with youth in the schools was another important aspect of this project. Putting together a mentoring program that focuses on overcoming mental illness and encourages students to ask for help was the ideal solution for destigmatizing in a classroom environment. The school in Morton County had turned down the idea as it would be giving the students "another job" on top of their studies and extra curriculums. Unfortunately, the Morton County suffered another loss. The devastating loss caused the school to reconsider the mentoring program in hopes to prevent more loss in the community. It's important to not give up after a failed attempt and instead approach the conversation differently and with urgency.

Resources Identified

The project was supported at the grassroots level, through the Rural Champion grant, donations from employers, city, and foundations.

Additional non-financial resources included:

- Volunteers
- 988 resources/ SAMSHA
- A Friend Asks Compass Behavioral Health
- DCCCA
- QPR
- K-State Research and Extension Mental Health First Aid Training
- Mental Health America
- Rural Minds
- YOGOWYPI (You only get out what you put in) - Bill Cordes (will do presentations at the school)
- Jason Foundation
- Yellow Ribbon
- Alex Z. – State Suicide prevention coordinator
- Allyssa – 988 Project coordinator
- Laura M – Youth Suicide Prevention Coordinator – Attorney General's Office

TRAILS AND RECREATION IN INDEPENDENCE

Background Information

Like many rural Kansas communities, Independence, Kansas is focused on maintaining its population and recruiting businesses and their families to the area. While the town of 8,500 currently boasts a beautiful park and zoo, there is a strong need for additional outdoor recreation venues promoting healthy experiences and overall lifestyle. This project encompasses various initiatives to fill this gap and looks to connect resources and community partners.

Montgomery County/Independence is one of the least healthy counties in Kansas. When the primary local gym closed in 2021, many community members were left without a recreation outlet. Community members utilize the park and zoo, along with many streets for exercise. We set out to enhance areas that are being used and to create new places and experiences for community members.

This program compliments the current project by the City of Independence for a new Central Park Sports Complex (2024) and a trail for hiking and biking that opened in May 2023. While a trail system and overall wellness initiative has been a desire of many community members, it's not had a Champion dedicated to ensuring growth and implementation.

The vision is to create a healthier and happier community through organized activities and outdoor spaces, primarily trails and to create connections to people and organizations within the community. Success will be measured by the number of trails and programs implemented in our community.

Steps to Success

The Champion made great progress with its outreach efforts and connecting community members to this project through numerous speaking engagements and social media posts, connecting and partnering with the City of Independence and Main Street, and including organizations such as Rotary, Lions, Montgomery County, Labette Health and numerous private businesses.

Many community members have participated in the development in this project, being primarily led by the Champion and the three community members who initiated the grant application. At the inception of the Rural Connection project, the Champion conducted meetings throughout the community with stakeholders in various capacities to help steer the initiatives of the program. The outcomes of these meetings led to numerous

additional meetings and introductions to new stakeholders and created the overall framework for the project.

Overall, the community is fully behind the project. One organization with a sub-project was not able to move forward due to conflicting efforts. This project is focused heavily on connecting people and organizations, and overall inclusivity.

Solutions

The initial meetings provided substantial information which led to the introduction of additional stakeholders and to the prioritization of action items. The most important factor in this project was the introduction to the resource partners throughout the state who are heavily involved with trails.

The Champion attended three "Do-A-Logue" events, which are trail building workshops sponsored by the Kansas Sampler Foundation, Sunflower Foundation and the Kansas Trails Council. These highly informative, day-long sessions throughout the rural areas of Kansas were instrumental in developing the overall trail strategy. The networking opportunities that resulted from these sessions were invaluable and has led to pivotal relationships.

Progress in this first grant cycle had been significant. There was a target for laying the foundation for future success. The target trail received City Commission approval to begin development on a 1.4-mile trail that connects with another existing trail and construction will commence in November. Additionally, the Champion will develop pathway signage for a recently completed trail to help patrons better navigate the two-way loop trail. There are plans for two additional walking trails in the works, but the primary focus is the larger, more central project.

The major deviation from the initial scope was the addition of minor capacity building for the supporting organization, the Community Foundation for Independence (CFFI). This Rural by Choice grant was implemented through CFFI, who supports 40+ community organizations as a fiscal/administrative steward. The Champion developed a new website to provide each of the organizations an online fundraising page to help raise funds for their organizations and to provide basic information to the public about their organizations.

The implementation grant is being used to support construction, supplies, signage and marketing for River Trail/Interurban Trails and Industrial Park, as well as develop and assist with safe streets/pathways initiative currently supported by the city.

Resources Identified

The Rural Champion grant and additional funding

awarded through the Sunflower Foundation and Patterson Family Foundation/Office of Rural Prosperity.

Additional non-financial resources included:

- City of Independence and Main Street
- Montgomery County
- Labette Health
- Numerous private businesses
- Volunteer time

Key partners to connect with for trails:

- [Kansas Sampler Foundation](#)
- [Sunflower Foundation](#)
- [Kansas Trails Council](#)
 - [Trail Building 101](#)
- [K-State's Trail Talk Tuesday](#)