

EXTENSION SNAPSHOT

Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit

July 2023



Illinois Extension
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Focus groups help identify and address needs related to health equity

Staff from University of Illinois Extension and [University of Illinois College of Medicine Peoria](#) (UICOMP) have been collaborating on a multi-year project with community organizations to expand public access to health and wellness resources. The health equity project was made possible through additional funding from [Extension's Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program—Education](#) (SNAP-Ed) grant.

Extension staff serving Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties connected with a group of interested partners to form the Peoria Youth Wellness Community Partnership (PYWCP). The partnership includes SNAP-Ed, [4-H](#), UICOMP, [Peoria Public Schools](#), Peoria afterschool and out-of-school providers, including [Peoria Park District](#), [Peoria YMCA](#), and [Goodwill](#).

“Early on the PYWCP identified and targeted their efforts on three Peoria zip codes with some of the highest poverty rates in the state,” said SNAP-Ed Educator [Rebecca Crumrine](#). “Peoria schools in these zip codes have 79% of students living in low-income households and 17.7% experiencing food insecurity. We know many social drivers in these communities affect child health and well-being.”

Through preliminary discussions, the project partners identified a need for better understanding of the necessary supports and any barriers to participating in afterschool programming. By building their project from the bottom up, the collaboration hopes to create equitable solutions driven by the community.

Over the course of six months, the team conducted 16 focus groups. One was with community afterschool providers, nine were with adults who care for children enrolled in Peoria Public Schools afterschool programs, and six were with youth ages 9-18 years from both Peoria Public Schools afterschool programs and community-based organizations in the target area. Data from these groups was analyzed by UICOMP professionals and key themes emerged.

“Themes that our team saw included the benefits of socialization with peers and the role afterschool programs could play in being an extended learning environment for students,” explained 4-H Educator [Judy Schmidt](#). “As we looked at opportunities identified, it was clear across the board that parents, youth, and afterschool providers expressed the need for more mental health supports and activities to help youth better manage their emotions and behaviors.”

Based on the information gathered from the community, the collaboration has begun to implement two pilot programs to serve these opportunities and needs. One pilot is addressing the need for more access to different activities and building on the strength of creating spaces where kids can have an extended learning environment. The other pilot project will work to help moderate youth behaviors and provide needed social, emotional, and mental health supports through local afterschool programs.

Rebecca Crumrine
Illinois SNAP-Ed Educator
racumri@illinois.edu