



La Crosse Medical Health Science Consortium and Partners

Connecting Community Capacity

Introduction

La Crosse County, Wisconsin, has had substantial success in forming community partnerships to improve health. One influential partnership is that of the La Crosse Medical Health Science Consortium (the Consortium). The Consortium was established in 1993 as a 501(c) (3) nonprofit corporation by five founding partner institutions: Gundersen Lutheran Health System, Mayo Clinic Health System-Franciscan Healthcare, the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Viterbo University, and Western Technical College. The partnership has since expanded to include the School District of La Crosse and the La Crosse County Department of Health.

The Consortium began with a focus on training healthcare workers in response to projected health care workforce shortages, but soon expanded its focus, in part by establishing a Population Health Committee. The Population Health Committee co-sponsors, connects, and supports health improvement initiatives being conducted by community organizations and government agencies across the county and the region. The ultimate goal of the Consortium is to provide a foundation for health in La Crosse; its stated mission is “fostering collaboration for healthier communities.”

The Consortium’s Population Health Committee and its partners have been instrumental in developing an action plan to make La Crosse the healthiest county in Wisconsin, an online health scorecard which grades the health of La Crosse and 19 other counties,

Fast Facts

Community/Organization: La Crosse County, WI, La Crosse Medical Health Science Consortium.

Problem/Issue: To improve population health in La Crosse County by focusing on Chronic Disease, Injury and Violence Prevention, Infectious Disease and Mental Health.

Impact: The Consortium expanded its reach to community health by establishing the Population Health Committee, which is responsible for the creation of the online Health Scorecard, the *Healthiest County 2015: La Crosse* plan and the annual Health Summit. The Population Health Committee promotes collaboration, streamlines efforts and reduces overlap. In addition, the committee also monitors progress of the *Healthiest County* plan.

Differentiating Feature: The La Crosse Health Science Consortium serves 20 counties across Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota.

Leaders/Lead Organization: Gundersen Lutheran Health System, Mayo Clinic Health System, The University of WI – La Crosse, Viterbo University, Western Technical College, La Crosse County Health Department and the La Crosse School District.

and an annual Health Summit that brings together many of the organizations working on health improvement projects in La Crosse county.

Results

The Consortium works with its partners in the community to connect local efforts that relate to the focus areas and goals of the overall community health improvement plan, *Healthiest County 2015: La Crosse*. Highlights of work done by local agencies within the four focus areas, Chronic Disease, Infectious Disease, Mental Health and Injury and Violence Prevention, include:

- All five public school districts in La Crosse County are participating in the Farm2School program, supported by the La Crosse County Health Department.
- A Complete Streets ordinance was passed in La Crosse in 2011 through partnerships of government and private agencies. Complete Streets describes roadways that are designed and operated to enable safe access and travel for all users including accommodation of pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and public transit.
- Gundersen Lutheran's 500 Club has expanded to 53 locations in 2011 with support from a Health Department grant, up from 29 in 2010. The 500 Club offers convenient and healthy foods for people who are on the go.
- A Burden of Mental Illness Report was completed in December 2011.
- Work is currently being done with local tavern owners to adopt evidence-based strategies for safe-alcohol serving, as part of a community-academic partnership between the Consortium and the Medical College of Wisconsin's Injury Research Center.

Identified Themes Supporting the Community's Success

Partnerships/Connections – The greater La Crosse County community is home to a wide array of health improvement activities, which are themselves comprised of diverse partnerships among health care providers, public health, schools, higher education, local government, and business leaders. Lasting collaborations are sustained, in part, by a strong sense of community. Coalition members attributed the sense of community in La Crosse to several factors: La Crosse is large enough to be a city with significant institutions and resources, but small enough for people to know one another and have opportunities to build personal connections. In addition, many of the community collaborations reach out to “non-traditional” partners in health improvement, including college students, city planners, city council members and tavern owners. This allows the collaborations to spread their message to a larger audience. Many coalitions have intentionally sought to include, and build relationships with, those who may potentially resist or oppose the coalition's efforts in order to overcome what would otherwise be barriers to success.

Infrastructure – The strong infrastructure in La Crosse plays a key role in the success of the various community collaborations. La Crosse is home to two large health systems: Gundersen Lutheran and Mayo Clinic – Franciscan Healthcare, and three colleges: Viterbo, Western Technical and UW–La Crosse. In addition, La Crosse is the media hub for the region, with three television stations, the only daily newspaper in the surrounding area, many radio stations, weekly newspapers and newsletters. These media outlets cover the entire region and have been effectively used by local coalitions to raise community awareness and spread the word about

local coalition activities. For its part, the local media is very active and engaged; reporters and editors seek to understand how they can support, through their coverage, efforts to make La Crosse and the region a healthier place. This collaboration with local media has improved community awareness of and participation in health initiatives and projects.

Action Plan – The Consortium’s Population Health Committee developed an online Health Scorecard, which pools data from La Crosse and 19 counties in the region served by Consortium founding organizations. The data from this system, along with data from the *County Health Rankings*, was used to develop the *Healthiest County 2015: La Crosse* health plan. The plan defines specific goals for the following health focus areas: Chronic Disease, Infectious Disease, Mental Health and Injury and Violence Prevention. This plan was first introduced to various

collaborations, coalitions and organizations in La Crosse in 2009 at the first Health Summit, a half-day event that brought together people in the community who were working to improve population health. The goal of the plan is to provide direction for existing collaborations to work toward the common goal of becoming the healthiest county in Wisconsin. The plan promotes collaboration, reduces overlap and streamlines efforts. The Population Health Committee monitors progress toward attaining the goals of the Healthiest County plan.

Key Funding –The La Crosse County Health Department received a prestigious \$2.2 million Communities Putting Prevention to Work grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to address obesity. This funding was a key enabler in the success of the Green and Complete Streets project, which provided \$5,000 mini grants to fifteen local businesses to help them purchase showers, bike racks and other tools that are needed to encourage staff to walk, run or bike to work. It also helped expend the 500 Club, a healthy eating program coordinated by Gundersen Lutheran registered dietitians who partner with local businesses, convenience stores and restaurants to help them advertise the healthier 500 calorie or less options available for purchase. Despite these successes, securing funding for health initiatives is often difficult and collaborations continue to seek grant dollars to supplement and sustain their efforts.

Lessons Learned

- In order to get community buy in, trust has to be built. The community needs to know that a new collaboration is not there to take over and enforce, but instead is there to help and assist.
- An annual meeting bringing various community members together helps build relationships and creates momentum.
- Many people think that health improvement is “somebody else’s job,” so it is up to the community collaboration to educate potential partners on how and why public health is their job, too.
- Reach out to the “unusual suspects” as potential partners from the beginning of any initiative.

Challenges

Engaging Diverse Populations – Challenges related to racial and ethnic differences in health outcomes persist in the county, as they do in most counties in Wisconsin. Coalition members observed that members of the Hmong population, the largest minority population in La Crosse, experience significant health disparities and are primarily living in poverty. There is also a growing Black community that has not yet been reached effectively by existing health improvement initiatives. Leaders of community health improvement efforts recognize that more substantial efforts to connect with the Hmong and African American communities need to be made.

College Student Outreach – Reaching college students has often been difficult, particularly in regards to safe biking practices and alcohol policies on-and-off campus. Reaching students is only part of the difficulty of changing the drinking culture in La Crosse, as in other parts of Wisconsin. Building support for policy change is particularly difficult.

Evaluation – Evaluation is notably challenging for many collaborations. In La Crosse, the challenge is heightened by the lack of comparable data collection across the many initiatives taking place.

Next Steps

There is currently a push in La Crosse to more fully engage the business community in health promotion efforts. The Consortium and many local coalitions are planning to expand their work with business leaders to implement health improvement practices in the workplace and support community-level health improvement activities.

For More Information

To learn more about the work of the La Crosse Medical Health Science Consortium, visit

<http://www.lacrosseconsortium.org/content/c/home> or contact Catherine Kolkmeier, ckolkmeier@uwlax.edu.