

McDowell County Community Focus Groups Summary of Findings



Project team members conducted three community focus groups on March 1, 2013 in Welch, WV to identify participant ($N=22$, Females=17) perceptions regarding existent strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats relative to physical activity promotion in McDowell County.

Strengths. Children, adolescents, and adults in McDowell County want to be physically active. The few structured activities that are available such as the league basketball for school children and Zumba class for adults have been popular and well attended. General interest in physical activity is therefore not of much concern. The schools represent the most frequently mentioned facilities available for physical activity but they are usually not open to adult citizens which may constitute an opportunity for future utility. In the words of one participant: "...you've got all these nice schools with nice gymnasiums and try to get them. It's like having an audience with the pope to try to get to use the school facility paid for by taxpayers' money." Additionally, several outside spaces are available, such as playgrounds with basketball hoops and county and state parks. However, many of them need renovation to be applicable.

Weaknesses. A recurring key theme in the focus groups was the geographical size of McDowell County relative to the number of inhabitants and the time it takes to travel between places due to the rural nature of the area. A participant describes; "I think where McDowell County is so spread out it's, you know [a] fitness center, if we had one you actually would probably need one in each community because where it's so spread out and it takes so long to get from one place to the other." Moreover, relative deprivation (poverty), lack of promotion in opportunities for physical activity, and lack of suitable platforms of communication (e.g., radio, newspaper, etc.) all represent additional weaknesses concerning physical activity in the area. These issues are mirrored by the absence of suitable indoor facilities to be used over the winter months in most communities in the county. A web site that would include a comprehensive listing of season-based physical activity opportunities might be a feasible way of promoting activity in the county.

Opportunities. Most participants in the community focus groups believed that increase in availability and promotion of both organized and unorganized physical activity programs and facilities would be welcomed by citizens of all ages in the county. In this respect carrying out several smaller scale projects or programs may be more feasible than promoting fewer larger ones. A community member speaks; "I think that smaller programs scattered throughout the county would be more beneficial to the county that one huge something in Welch because of the geography, the distance and transportation." In line with this notion and for the immediate benefit to the citizens of McDowell County, working on renovating existing facilities may represent a sensible starting point in this regard.

Threats. Several ongoing macro level threats may stand in the way of physical activity promotion in McDowell County. The most frequently mentioned are; poverty, multi-generational families (grandparents, sometimes even great grandparents, raising children), drug abuse, especially with prescription drugs, unemployment, geographic isolation and travel conditions. Many people in the more rural parts of the county are unable to travel long distances for physical activity. Together these issues call for local level actions and programs for physical activity, but they also highlight the structural problems faced in the county. In the short term, locally-based actions would promote physical activity of all people; children, youth, and adults, but in the long run the county needs economic development as well. Ideally these two factors should be tied together.