

Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Evaluation Quarterly Report July-September, 2008

This quarterly evaluation provides summary highlights on progress the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative made from July through September, 2008 while working to create a place "where healthier people are creating stronger families and vibrant communities [and] all residents and guests experience, promote, and celebrate healthy, locally grown food and abundant opportunities for physical activity and play everyday."

- **The FFI strategy of aligning resources and goals with related efforts is amplifying the work and resources of the FFI.** By identifying agencies and organizations doing related work, FFI leaders avoid duplication of work, ensure work complementarity, and create allies. These are the obvious benefits of aligning efforts. Less obvious are the cultural benefits. In the process of identifying partners and aligning resources, the FFI is ensuring that citizens continue to hear consistent messages from different community leaders, organizations, and institutions. This "surround sound" approach means the more they hear these messages from diverse quarters and interests, the more food- and obesity-related activities will become integrated into their collective consciousness and way of doing things.
- **Leaders of the Initiative are expanding their understanding of policy, and are recognizing more fully the abundant opportunities for policy change in the region.** Leaders have learned that policy change, often regarded as something "out there" beyond the grasp of the common citizen is actually something "right here" at home. County Fair board policies provide a supreme example of this. County fairs, typically showcases for new and improved agricultural techniques, equipment, crops, and livestock, are also known to offer a wide variety of educational, recreational, and social activities to fairgoers. They are also important for generating enthusiasm for agricultural activities and connecting people to sources of food. However, fair boards in the five-county region are beginning to schedule fair dates earlier in the year, making it difficult for residents to grow and enter blue ribbon peas, pumpkins, and homegrown pies. What impact might this have on the celebration of local food production? Leaders of the FFI are mounting efforts to convince fair boards to take this into consideration in future planning activities. Something similar is taking place in terms of local fitness policy. Leaders of the FFI are in the process of determining school policies related to community use of school recreational facilities in winter months when the harsh climate limits outdoor activities. It is still too early to approach schools on changing policies to accommodate community use; however, work the Initiative is doing with schools on the Regional School Planning work group (see paragraph below) is expected to make such conversations easier in the future.
- The Initiative has made a clear commitment to engaging schools in efforts of the Initiative as schools are a place where the most vulnerable children and their families can be reached throughout the region. Schools have not been an easy partner to engage but both the Initiative and schools are beginning to reap rewards from this

partnership. In September, after much work from the Initiative's School Engagement Work Group, **superintendents from 16 of the 17 school districts in the region agreed to develop a regional school partnership and learning community** focused on creating environments where students, families and staff have access to local healthy foods and spaces and places for physical activity and play, everyday. Each school committed two staff members to attend five full day meetings. In return, the NE Iowa FFI Regional Team committed resources to pay for substitutes to cover staff time while they attended the planning meetings. This large group has become the Regional School Planning work group, **an unprecedented partnership** comprised of a wide range of regional school staff, faculty, and representatives from cooks to school nurses, principals, teachers, and school board members. Already, this group is integrated with and complementing the efforts of other work groups in the Initiative. For instance, the Northeast Iowa Food and Farm Coalition has begun to work with the Regional School Planning Work Group to plan for a pilot Farm-to-School program in 2009. That the Regional School Planning Work Group exists is a tremendous accomplishment, let alone the fact that it is already working in tandem with other groups of the FFI.

- In March, 2008, the FFI invited two members of the Postville Diversity Council to join them in a workshop led by Visions called "Community Engagement from a Multicultural Perspective." Both members thought it was helpful and left with great ideas to take back to the Diversity Council. However, **natural disasters and immigration enforcement in the second quarter heightened the pressure on vulnerable populations and related service organizations in Northeast Iowa, setting back FFI work with the Diversity Council.** After the floods in June and the May raid of AgriProcessors meatpacking plant Postville, the demand for food pantry services and goods rose sharply from a typical maximum of 25 clients to over 300 people in one day. After these events, FFI conversations with the Diversity Council members focused on rebuilding capacity within the Council to deal with the crisis in Postville. Part of that conversation was to explore ways the Postville Diversity Council might help provide vulnerable families access to food locally produced in the region.
- **The NE Iowa FFI has evolved its collective thinking about community health, indicating that dynamic and continuous learning is taking place throughout the planning phase of the Initiative.** The Initiative had been engaging primarily county and state Public Health officials in conversations about performing a community health assessment in the region focused on collecting baseline information useful to Public Health. However, the Initiative began to realize that such an intense focus on assessment was not leaving much room for conversations about changing health indicators. Furthermore, the narrow focus on assessment was not only limiting the conversation but was also limiting partners with whom the Initiative was working on this set of issues. As the relationship with IDPH and the project co-evolved, so too did FFI thinking about the community health work. Instead of more narrowly focusing on assessment (although that is one element of it to be sure), now the charge of the community health assessment team is learning. Now the Community Health

Team, the group is working to actively engage people and organizations with the capacity to influence behaviors and the health status of residents. This wider scope is enabling the Initiative to engage a broader spectrum of health-interested and health-serving organizations and institutions such as doctors, nurses, and dieticians, as well as health insurance providers for the region's public schools and Luther College. The Initiative has realized in the process, as Paul Vandeventer best put it in his October, 2008 newsletter, that "Pulled together, placed in context and put to effective use, the civic knowledge possessed by community organizations and institutions, merely as a result of the privileged places they occupy in communities and the lives of their clients, positions them as leadership institutions for profound societal influence and impact. Every nonprofit leader needs to ask how this knowledge might improve lives and make communities more livable places. That means the organization has to see itself not just as a service center, but as a learning center that knows its community better than anyone else."

- **Work of the Initiative is changing the behaviors of local horticultural producers.** During this quarter, the NIFF coalition hosted a fruit and vegetable workshop. Among those attending was Mike Gooder, a local producer in the region who owns eight acres of greenhouses. Gooder's operation, the Plant Peddler, is the third largest begonia exporter in the world. As a result of his attendance and participation in NIFF and FFI discussions (read a local article about his operation in <http://www.crescotimes.com/archive/x776459004/Greenhouse-grown-produce-prolongs-growing-season-of-local-food>), Gooder talked with local Amish to learn which produce grows well in their greenhouses. Since then, three acres of Gooder's ornamental production have given way to production of tomatoes, zucchini, strawberries, green beans, cucumbers, green peppers, eggplant, and raspberries. The conversion from ornamentals to vegetables and berries allows him to implement more earth friendly practices and engage in off season production that positions him in a way so he doesn't compete with other producers. In fact, Gooder is working to recruit other producers to increase production that he will take to his markets in Des Moines and Chicago. Gooder hopes to recruit 40 producers to ramp up Northeast Iowa's vegetable production. Not only that, but he also has trucks to transport the produce to market. With healthy food distribution a challenge across the region, the partnership with Gooder provides win-win solutions that bring hope about Northeast Iowa's food production and marketing possibilities. And processing isn't far off the horizon. With all of these elements in place, Northeast Iowa is likely to find itself in the enviable position of having the production, processing, and distribution capacity to serve large markets in both the region and beyond. This demonstrates how successful the Initiative has been in connecting and engaging partners with resources to offer that in the process creates new opportunities for others in the region.