



Health Happens In Libraries

Wilkes County Public Library Better Choices, Better Health Workshop

North Wilkesboro, North Carolina / Community Size Served: 68,000
Primary Partner: Wilkes County Health Department

Community Engagement

Wilkes County (North Carolina) Public Library and its local health department partners brought a six-week workshop to community members, focused on chronic disease self-management. This “Better Choices, Better Health Workshop” was taught by certified instructors from the health department, based on curriculum developed at Stanford University. The initial six-week program occurred in June and July 2015, and 10 participants completed each of the six sessions.

Organizing the Event

Educating community members through this program supported the library’s vision of being seen as an accessible resource for reliable health information and support, particularly for community members who may not have access to the traditional healthcare system. This vision, led by County Librarian Julia Turpin, also supported the health department’s goal to bring its established health curriculum to a broader audience.

A focus on collaborative health programming was a natural next step for the library and health department for several reasons:

- Nearly one-third of area residents are active library card holders
- The central library location offers large, usable space for all citizens
- Local health priorities were already established through a recent community health assessment.

Factors that Contributed to Success

- 📍 **Focusing on current health needs:** Together, the library and health department made a conscious decision to focus combined efforts on current health needs in the community. The multiweek workshop model allowed individuals to focus on their unique priorities for managing immediate personal health concerns. The direct applicability of this approach helped spur interest and relevance for participants.
- 📍 **Providing healthy motivation:** The library and health department also provided participants with meaningful resources to encourage their ongoing involvement in the program. In addition to the educational experience, participants enjoyed dinner during each of the evening workshops, as well as daily door prizes such as relaxation CDs and pedometers. Investing in incentives for participants allowed the library and health department to encourage attendees to invest in their health over time.

Top 3 Tips

Julia shared the following tips for libraries interested in planning their own community health activities:

- 📍 **Identify relevance factors for participants:** Participants completed a short survey at the start of the program, which instructors used to adapt the workshop to the specific health needs of the class. Some of these unique needs related to participants' dietary restrictions, which were accommodated for the dinners offered during the program. If snack or meal planning is part of health programming at your library, be sure to plan and resource this with diverse dietary needs in mind.
- 📍 **Define an outreach strategy:** Prioritize communication with your partner(s) about advertising strategies and execution activities, so that specific audiences are targeted and no important groups are forgotten. Clear, advance communication is particularly relevant for activities in which participants are expected to participate over multiple weeks or in several sessions. This helps ensure that they understand expectations in advance and can seek clarification on any questions they may have, in order to take full advantage of the learning opportunity.
- 📍 **Remain open to new ideas:** Listen to what your community partner has to say at every step of engagement. Your partner may already have a program or priorities that will align with your library's public health goals, and resources to help you meet them.

Looking Forward

The library and health department plan to offer the "Better Choices, Better Health Workshop" series again in spring 2016, and support community members with additional health-specific initiatives such as flu shots and blood pressure screenings in an ongoing manner. As a result of forging this working relationship with the health department, the county librarian has been invited to join the community advisory council for the 2015 Wilkes County Community Health Assessment. This will enable the library to have ongoing insight into the health needs and priorities of the community, and influence the approach to comprehensive health promotion in Wilkes County.

“Access to information is a pillar of the most traditional library services. By partnering with our local Health Department not only are we providing new and quality information to our patrons—we are introducing the Health Department to a potentially new set of clients. This single partnership has expanded the role of the library as a center for community health information.”

—Julia Turpin, County Librarian, Wilkes County Public Library