



Health Happens In Libraries



Buffalo & Erie County Public Library Women's Health Fair

Buffalo, New York / Community Size Served: 919,040

Primary Partner: Catholic Health, a nonprofit healthcare system

Community Engagement

Buffalo & Erie County Public Library, in coordination with Catholic Health's Women Care division, convened 44 community organizations in a Women's Health Fair. The fair was held at the Central Library location in March 2015 and more than 300 community members attended. Everyone was welcome to learn about local health and wellness resources, and participate in interactive activities such as free bone density screening, a keynote address on healthy relationships, and Tai Chi and Zumba demonstrations, among others.

Organizing the Event

The Buffalo & Erie County Public Library system includes 37 libraries throughout Erie County. The Central Library is close to a growing medical corridor in downtown Buffalo, along with other community resources common in an urban core. In her role as an Information/Outreach Specialist, Renee Masters has experience partnering with local nonprofit organizations to raise awareness about community health issues. While collaborating with Catholic Health for the Women's Health Fair, Renee did so with the intent to make her process and learning something that could be shared and customized for other branches in the system.

The Central Library has built on the relationships and procedures established during the Women's Health Fair to support similar events at local branch libraries, with a focus on tailoring those events to unique branch communities. With Renee's support, the East Delavan branch manager coordinated a health fair in June 2015, with 12 exhibitors focused on family health. The foundation has been built for similar engagements at additional branches.

Factors that Contributed to Success

- 📍 ***Embracing an expanded definition of health:*** Referencing local health assessments and data, the library embraced an internal understanding that health needs and barriers go beyond diseases, conditions and healthcare providers, and instead involve the full social safety net of the community. Focusing the first health fair on women's health issues aligned nicely with established needs, as well as the library's March theme, *Women's History*.
- 📍 ***Evoking programmatic expertise:*** Public libraries have been running successful community events for decades. Whether it's a preschool storytime, a technology training, or a community health fair, the same basic principles for planning, prioritizing and seeking ongoing public and partner input can make an event a success. If you haven't had the chance to plan an event for your library, ask for guidance from somebody else on staff, or seek that expertise in a partner.

Top 3 Tips

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

- 📍 **Share learning proactively:** Renee created an engaging presentation of her process, challenges and learning from putting on the Women's Health Fair, and shared this at a system-wide Branch Manager's meeting shortly after the event. This opened systemic conversations about existing programming capacity and needs in unique library branches, and helped raise awareness about resources available within the library system to support health programming.
- 📍 **Focus your energy:** Community health can be an overwhelming topic. It's okay to focus your health outreach or programming efforts on an area you know will be useful to your community rather than trying to tackle multiple health priorities at once. Connecting with local agencies and experts engaged in building community health awareness can help you identify an initial topic to emphasize (such as healthy eating or health insurance outreach). Then, you can discover other opportunities to grow your outreach based on your partner or participant input.
- 📍 **Customize communications:** Cultural competence and plain language are essential in promoting and conducting community health events, particularly to members of the community who may not traditionally access public services. Be mindful not to adopt a "one-size-fits-all" approach to planning or marketing your events. Rather, be sure to use words that will help people feel that the service you are offering is offered in a safe space and is relevant to their needs. Remember that not everyone has access to a computer at home, and use multiple media for outreach. Engage trusted community gatekeepers to help spread the word, e.g., community-specific blogs or newspapers.

Looking Forward

In addition to creating an adaptable approach to health programming for the library system, the Central Library has been approached by the Erie County Health Department to assist them in promoting their Community Health Assessment survey. The library will do so through providing a link to the survey from the library's online health subject guides, and by providing space to the health department to engage with the public, furthering the library's strategic goal of providing information to create a vibrant, healthy, and informed community.

“Education is a first line of prevention when it comes to health and wellness. Thinking about the size or scope of your community engagement before seeking partners will help you find the right people in the right organizations. Don't be afraid to ask more than once—community organizations are eager to collaborate, once they know how dynamic the library truly is. You can be the one to show them.”

—Renee Masters, Information/Outreach Specialist, Buffalo & Erie County Public Library