

Building a Healthy Newton

What's Right for Newton?

The University of Iowa College of Public Health, Office of Outreach and Engagement, and Grinnell College are pleased to announce their collaboration with the city of Newton, Iowa, on the Newton Community Health Project. This community-engaged project to increase healthy behaviors from the ground up is supported by former Iowa Governor and Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and the Rockefeller Foundation. The purpose of the project is to identify and develop effective community-based programs and projects to support and promote community health, physical activity, and improved nutrition in Newton, with the ultimate goal of reducing obesity and its associated health problems. Students from the University of Iowa and Grinnell College, led by faculty and staff from both institutions, will conduct work with community partners in Newton to assess community resources and develop projects, programs, and action plans through May 2019. The project seeks to examine community health holistically, looking at connections between food and nutrition, the built environment, and exercise and physical activity. The project team will work closely with stakeholders in Newton to identify the community's wants and needs and engage with the community in developing projects, programs, and action plans for future implementation.

Two recent national reports make this a particularly timely project. The first brought some less-than-welcome news: in September 2018, a new report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed Iowa had moved from the 13th to the 4th highest obesity rate in the United States in just one year (from 2016 to 2017). In Iowa, 36.4% of adults and 17.7% of children (ages 10-17) are currently obese and at higher risk for diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other physical and mental health concerns. However, following the release of this data, in November 2018, new information on addressing this problem became available in the form of the Department of Health and Human Services guidelines for physical activity for all Americans, including children, adults of all ages, and those with a variety of different abilities. These guidelines emphasize that "everything counts" and the relevance of exercise and physical activity on all aspects of health, including mood, sleep, cognition, blood pressure, and insulin sensitivity.

Research has established the importance of both physical activity and nutrition in improving health outcomes, and it also indicates that focusing on individual changes is less effective than creating an environment and culture where healthy behaviors can thrive. As a "shining star of Central Iowa," Newton is highly invested in community-centered, progressive initiatives for a healthy and vibrant community. The University of Iowa and Grinnell College look forward to a partnership that will contribute new, effective solutions to creating a healthier Newton and a healthier Iowa.