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TOP STORY

COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS

Be Healthy Berrien boosts access to trails, locally grown food

By TONY WITKOWSKI HP Local News Editor
Jun 10, 2023

From introducing healthy options in food deserts to finding ways to connect various trails, Be Healthy Berrien has been a key resource in Southwest Michigan.

Created in 2010, Be Healthy Berrien is a collective impact initiative that was launched to reduce and prevent the prevalence of obesity through policy, system and environmental changes in Berrien County. The countywide partnership's focus areas are two-fold: improving access to affordable healthy foods and improving opportunities for active living.

Be Healthy Berrien has six organizations that sit on its steering committee, including the Berrien County Health Department, YMCA of Greater Michiana, Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, Corewell Health South, Equilibrium Fitness and United Way of Southwest Michigan. United Way

serves as the support agency and fiduciary of Be Healthy Berrien.

Having these major organizations involved has led to an increase in collaboration, said Be Healthy Berrien Director Dawn Marie Smith.

“It’s a means of adopting our work and bringing nonprofits and other organizations together around a common agenda,” she said. “Essentially, the impact can produce large scale change in ways that other forms of collaboration and other individual efforts might not achieve alone.”

In recent years, the initiative – through frequent work with the six organizations – has helped boost access to healthy food and create more opportunities for physical activity.



A new Healthy Corner Store, at Sunshine Market in Benton Harbor, is part of an initiative by the YMCA of Greater Michiana and Be Healthy Berrien. It features a variety of fresh produce and vegetables.

Don Campbell / HP staff

Making policies

Early on, Smith said they realized there was a need for a local food council.

The Southwest Michigan Local Food Council was formed under Be Healthy Berrien, as a collective of advocates who could take evidence-based action on forming an equitable food system. The council’s membership is made up of local jurisdictions, farmers, nonprofits and community members.

“We are trying to support local farmers and entrepreneurs – just anyone trying to provide local food to our community,” Smith said. “Essentially when you think about policy changes, you’re wanting to implement or change an environment through those types of mediums. They are practical ways for us

to improve obesity, diabetes and cancer.” Smith said the food council was also created because the region has remarkable farming conditions.

“During the pandemic, we all were reliant on supply chains that broke down,” Smith said. “If we are building more residency within our local food system, then we are able to support local growers. But when faced with a pandemic, we are able to have a little more stability to overcome those challenges.”

Per Corewell Health South’s Community Health Needs Assessment, the three leading causes of death in Berrien County are heart disease, cancer and cerebrovascular disease.

In Berrien County, there are 16 food deserts in the cities of Benton Harbor and Niles, and the townships of Benton, Oronoko and Niles. Nine of the 16 food deserts are also access burdened. Food deserts are geographic areas where community members have few to no convenient options for securing affordable and healthy foods.

For poverty-level households, having enough food can be a basic challenge. Smith said this means community members may have to make trade-offs between paying rent, stocking the refrigerator or going without health care.



Dawn Marie Smith, director of Be Healthy Berrien, is joining with the YMCA of Greater Michiana to encourage exercise and healthy eating habits.

Don Campbell / HP staff

Healthy options

One such effort to address the food deserts has been the Healthy Corner Store Initiative.

As part of a collaboration between the YMCA and Be Healthy Berrien, the initiative partners corner stores with local growers to sell produce in areas that need it most.

Smith said these “Healthy Corner Stores” operate within established convenience stores, gas stations and other mom-and-pop stores to bring in fruit and vegetables to replace highly processed food.

“Corner stores can be the main source of food in communities that lack supermarkets,” Smith said. “This initiative converts existing corner stores in neighborhoods to carry fresh produce and healthy food options, thus influencing health by changing the conditions within a community and making the healthy choice the easy choice.”

The Healthy Corner Store Initiative is now operated and supported by the YMCA, which uses its census tract data to identify new areas of need.

The newest Healthy Corner Store is the Sunshine Market in Benton Harbor, which has seen interest since adding a produce section in March.

Healthy Corner Stores

There are four Healthy Corner Stores that work with the YMCA of Greater Michiana to provide fresh produce to food deserts in Berrien County.

- B&B Grocery at 337 East St. Joseph St., Watervliet
- Sunshine Market at 130 West Napier Ave., Benton Harbor
- Citgo gas station at 31884 M-140, Covert
- Riverside Food & Liquor Store at 1206 Front St., Niles

Caprice McDonald, community wellness coordinator at the YMCA, said the four existing Healthy Corners Stores have helped to partially bridge the food gap.

“A lot of patrons want to eat healthier, they just don’t always have the option,” McDonald said. “These stores are just a small step to generational change.”

The YMCA works with store owners to assist with merchandising, marketing and other ongoing support.

Be Healthy Berrien also collaborates with the health department to support the Benton Harbor Farmers Market.

The health department has been operating the market since 2010. Similar to the Healthy Corner Stores, the farmers market was started with the intention of providing residents with access to locally grown produce.

This year’s market begins June 21.

“That’s one of my call to actions. We’re looking for small to mid-size food producers,” Smith said. “Part of trying to prop up the local food system is to get these farmers to participate in the market. They have a better understanding of what’s grown locally.”

On the trail

Outside of food security, Be Healthy Berrien puts an emphasis on exercise and trail expansion.

Smith said Be Healthy Berrien is the facilitator for the multi-stakeholder partnership that supports the eight-mile extension of the Indiana-Michigan River Valley Trail.

Once done, this project will expand the existing 17-mile trail that currently connects Niles to Mishawaka, Ind.

United Way of Southwest Michigan, representing a large coalition of partners – including local municipalities, the Friends of Berrien County Trails and Be Healthy Berrien – received \$912,000 for the development of the first section of the trail extension. The funds will cover final design, engineering and grade inspection costs.



Marcy Hamilton, deputy director / senior planner of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, and Gary Wood, president of the Friends of Berrien County Trails, look over a map of the Indiana-Michigan River Valley Trail while visiting the Brandywine Creek Nature Preserve in 2021 in Niles.

Don Campbell / HP file photo

Last month, Smith and a few others hosted U.S. Rep. Tim Walberg at the McCoy’s Creek trailhead as he seeks \$2.1 million in funding from the House Appropriations Committee for the Niles-Buchanan Trail Connection project.

While Smith is the only employee at Be Healthy Berrien, she’s quick to point to the various organizations and leaders who she works with on a regular basis.

“It’s not just me. It’s about connecting people to be more efficient,” she said. “The collaboration and relationships I have with steering committee members and their staff has been instrumental.”

Serving on the coalition’s steering committee is Mark Weber, CEO of YMCA of Greater Michiana.

“A healthy community is one in which multiple sectors collaborate to improve the conditions that influence our health and well-being,” Weber said in a prepared statement. “Be Healthy Berrien has set a clear foundation for its partnerships, these strong collaborative efforts provide the path to produce a greater impact with better outcomes.”

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Tags

Be Healthy Berrien

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