

Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative
Quarterly Evaluation Update Key Summary Points
April 1- June 30, 2008

This quarterly evaluation provides a summary update on key progress points for the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative as they work 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."

Achievements, Adaptations, Innovations

- There has been measurable progress toward identifying the most promising strategies that will move the Initiative closer to its collective vision. A core theory of success, underscored by principles of quality relationships, quality collective thinking, quality collective action, and quality results, is the platform from which the Initiative will use its core theory of change to design and launch the Community Action Plan, which will guide future efforts. Indicators of progress are based on organizational learning, adaptation, and innovation taking place during planning activities carried out in this quarter, a time that moved the project forward but also brought challenges and delays.
 - In June, **devastating floods receiving nationwide attention ravaged the region**, damaging roads, bridges, buildings, cropland, and recreational facilities. The status of the outdoor built environment, recently documented by the NEI FFI built environment work group, quickly changed as floodwaters either washed away or structurally compromised existing infrastructure such as trails, ball fields, and park facilities. Sand volleyball courts suddenly lost their sand to rising waters and ball fields located on a flood plain or close to a river were contaminated with "black water" as raw sewage found its way into the watershed. Topsoil used for row crop and vegetable production also either washed away or became contaminated. The FFI cancelled June meetings because the assault on the region made travel logistically impossible. The transportation infrastructure was so damaged that roads became impassable and if meeting locations were not flooded, they were turned into public shelters. Regardless of whether people had a place to meet and could actually find a way to get there, many simply could not make it because most FFI volunteers and leaders were intent on protecting their own property or helping their neighbors and communities. For example, one FFI leader who owns a farm equipment implement dealership put new inventory to use pumping water in locations at risk of flooding. Not surprisingly, public authorities entered emergency management mode, engaging in only those activities that met the most basic, pressing needs. These events disrupted the FFI temporarily, but efforts have since recommenced at the speed and pace experienced before. **The floods brought residual challenges with which the Initiative is still coping** (such as addressing the question of when the recreational infrastructure will be

rebuilt and who will pay for it). However, floods are bringing more attention to the promise of local markets. **Efforts to rebuild may also offer new opportunities.**

- Natural disasters aside, **human-led disasters have also caused turmoil in the region** which affected the progress of FFI. A month before the floods in May 12, 2008, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raided Agriprocessor's Inc. in Postville (Allamakee County), the largest kosher slaughterhouse and packing plant in the country, bringing social unrest and economic hardship to a town already struggling to support its most vulnerable populations. The **immigration raid** led to the arrest of 390 workers. The FFI has also been impacted. The raid redirected the work of one of the Initiative's liaisons to the Latino community, a lay minister affiliated with a local church, to serve people displaced by the raids. The FFI finds itself at a pivotal point in determining who to include in their efforts and how to reach them when the social fabric disintegrates and trusted institutions such as churches and schools are drained of human or financial resources. In addition, leaders of the Initiative find themselves in the difficult position of proceeding in a noble, but not necessarily fruitful manner of including everyone in decision making or making a difficult decision of bypassing people who do not want to be included and focusing energy on including people who will benefit most from participation. There is no doubt the Initiative will move forward but the path forward may be different as a result of the raid and the floods in the region. Already **the Initiative is using both crises to inform the way in which they do their work to ensure people have access to healthy, locally grown food and opportunities for physical activity and play.**
- In May, members of the Human and Financial Resource Work Group met with the NE Iowa RC&D Personnel Committee to **address changes in the arrangement between the FFI and the NE Iowa RC&D.** This event suggests the FFI is able to 1) recognize and commit time and attention to specific issues at critical junctures, 2) assign delicate tasks to subgroups to act on its behalf, 3) trust in the skills and abilities of the individuals who represent the larger group, 4) adapt and effectively respond to new information on a moment's notice (some of the information brought up at the meeting was new and required immediate response), 5) function to achieve project goals in the interest of the project, and 6) share leadership responsibilities.
- The FFI made progress toward a **more shared leadership** model. While FFI conveners are key leaders (e.g. keeping planning activities on track, coordinating planning activities, making connections, recruiting and retaining other leaders, managing relationships, pairing relationships, etc.), the success of the FFI depends on more than their contributions. There is increasing understanding among project leaders that widespread community engagement is critical to the project because work cannot be accomplished by them alone. Leadership must be owned by different people doing different things. Indicators of shared leadership include the increasing interest and opportunity for volunteers to take on formal

leadership roles, project volunteers offering to connect with others, and people taking on more responsibility. Part of these gains can be attributed to the recognition by FFI leaders that other leaders in the region may already be doing similar or complementary work and should be engaged in the FFI. The FFI is seeking ways to connect them to the FFI so that work is not duplicated and work of the FFI builds on the work others are already doing. Successful marriages that result enhance everyone's work by giving both groups new sources of support, access to new resources, and more credibility. The progression toward more shared leadership is an increasing sense of a shared identity which serves to create more buy-in. FFI leaders are learning to think more regionally evidenced when ideas, not people, gain support from others representing different parts of the region rather than receiving support from people they know. FFI leaders are also volunteering to do more of the "soft" work of building quality relationships with participating organizations and partners.

- The NE Iowa FFI is also making progress in terms of **broadening understanding about community engagement** and why it is important to the project. The group has used the diversity training it received from Kellogg to expand its notion of diversity from one based on race and ethnicity to one that includes other characteristics, including gender, class, age, religion, and sexual orientation. The group engaged in this activity to bring it closer to effective community engagement. The FFI is attentive to ways of improving and measuring. Leaders have already articulated the need to bring those with less social, economic, and political power to the table to make decisions. At a Regional Leadership Team meeting, one leader said he wanted to see more Latino leaders at the table and that it is not enough to receive updates on what is happening in the Latino community. The Latino liaison had similar sentiments in the sense he feels overwhelmed that he should represent all of the voices from the Latino community in the region when there are so many varied and distinct voices that need to be heard. This discomfort with what "is" in this regard will likely provide impetus for the group to move closer to what it wants to be. On a related note, FFI leaders are better understanding one way to move in that direction is to advocate for those with less power, participation, and voice so they become empowered to get involved in their communities. Additional **evidence of advocacy** is apparent when the Initiative makes funding requests to support inclusion efforts such as language translation and engaging low resource families, communities, and youth and in the project.
- The project is coming closer to developing a more concrete approach for involving more youth in the project. Currently engaged youth initially had plans to "cast a wide net" by setting up five county-based youth groups but have since concluded they may meet with greater success starting with what they know. That is, they are planning to set up a youth group in the school districts of already-represented youth on the FFI. **Learning the ropes in a familiar setting may yield more success** than trying to start groups where strong relationships with the project do not yet exist. Once the already-represented school districts are engaged,

the plan is to reach out to other school districts. This strategy demonstrates the NEI FFI is pursuing plans to maximize success and impact.

- The FFI is floating the idea of **developing a trained speaker's group** to appropriately articulate to the public the work and goals of the FFI, rather than expecting every leader involved to develop these skills. The group wants to **draw on the differential strengths** within the group, recognizing that some leaders will have interest and skills in verbal communication while others may not. The idea of a speaker's group surfaced on several fronts when the FFI found itself receiving numerous requests to speak to community groups during the winter. Several months later, the Initiative began talking about the need to increase its organizational capacity to do this work effectively as the group was organizing itself into the various working groups, one of which was the Communications Work Group. This group is currently working to build its capacity based on Kellogg-funded research which shows that organizing efforts are more likely to succeed if the public hears messages in a way that resonates with them.

- The Initiative had decided that the participation of **schools will be critical to the future of the project**, but are not an easy partner to engage. The Initiative is therefore investing a whole host of resources in developing ways to effectively engage schools, including:
 - Pulling together two or three people from each school in the region on May 14th and using site visits with school wellness committees as key informant interviews that provided insights into the situation of schools as it relates to food and fitness.
 - Participants agreed a second meeting was necessary and agreed to attend after the school year ended in June, but the flood intervened and the meeting was cancelled.
 - Members of the Initiative's School Engagement Work Group, led by a curriculum coordinator/food service director, superintendent, and school principal were heartened by the results and agreed to do much of the legwork for ensuring that school administrators and superintendents felt compelled to attend the follow up meeting to be held in September, 2008 which will focus on **developing regional partnerships**.

Next Steps

The Initiative continues to deepen their understanding of Public Health partners in order to align the work of the FFI and the work of Public Health around the FFI Vision. The Initiative will, no doubt, continue to build and maintain quality relationships with additional partners who are ready to stand by and carry the project forward.