

CASE EXAMPLE

OHIO SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH ALLIANCE— THE METROHEALTH SYSTEM FOOD ACCESS LEARNING NETWORK

Youth Engagement

Background

Heights Wellness Center is an 1,850 square foot school-based health center located within Cleveland Heights High School in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, an inner-ring suburb of Cleveland. We offer Primary Care, Behavioral Health, Dental, and Telehealth services. Heights Wellness Center had 1,042 patient visits from August 2023-July 2024.

Getting Started

The goals of the project were to:

1 Engage youth voice and collect feedback on the health and social drivers of health (SDOH) services offered by the MetroHealth School Health Program by establishing youth advisory councils (YACs) at 3 high schools in the Greater Cleveland area, representing diverse student populations in marginalized communities, and

2 Increase food access in those school communities through youth-led food access projects.

The project was generously funded through Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry and School-Based Health Alliance’s Food Access Learning Network grantmaking at both the national level and through an Ohio School-Based Health Alliance subaward. The MetroHealth project team consisted of a food security program manager and subject-matter expert for the System, and a school health nurse coordinator and community health worker based at the Heights Wellness Center.

We began by securing support for the YAC at Cleveland Heights High School by meeting with school administration and identifying a teacher to champion the project. Next, Heights High incoming 10th - 12th grade students who frequented the Heights Wellness Center often were invited to participate in the formation of the YAC. A monthly meeting schedule was established for the 2023-24 school year.



Youth Activities

Monthly YAC meetings were held throughout the 2023-24 school year. Meeting agendas were set by the project lead, in response to youth interest in health-related services and in service of moving the group towards a youth-led food access project in the Spring. The YAC learned about school health services offered, SDOH, food security, and community food access work in Cleveland. Each meeting served a healthy lunch for the YAC members.

In November 2023, the Heights YAC joined members of the 2 other MetroHealth YACs from across the area for a field trip. The field trip took them to the [Greater Cleveland Food Bank](#) for a tour and informational sessions, as well as to the learning garden of a local food sovereignty organization engaged in farm-to-school activities, [Food Strong](#).

In January, the YAC began exploring their options for a food access project to serve their community in earnest. The Heights YAC first identified that they would like to create a space where youth could safely study and be provided a healthy meal while they await their guardians to get home. To that end, MetroHealth staff explored potential partnerships with local organizations within walking distance of the school. However, the ongoing commitment of the meal program eventually made the YAC members change their focus to establishing a monthly school market, a program that could create a big impact for the community with less of a time commitment for the busy youth.



MetroHealth staff made the connection to the Food Bank to initiate the school market process. Youth members decided on the logistics of the school market and their commitment to volunteer each month. Youth leaders within the YAC created a plan and presented it to their school principal for approval in order to establish the school market. MetroHealth staff, YAC members, and the sponsor teacher all completed the required Food Bank training in order to establish the school as a new market site.

The first Heights High school market offered 4,000 pounds of fresh produce to the community on the last Friday in May 2024, with YAC volunteer members, their friends, and project leadership present. The school market has continued to run on the last Friday of each month and will do so April - September each year. The market serves a 3-day supply of fresh fruits and vegetables to about 300 individuals each month.





What Makes This Program Successful?

The program was successful because the Heights YAC had excellent youth engagement. Engagement was driven by several factors, including the existing trusting relationships that Heights Wellness Center staff have with the students, the accessibility of the Heights Wellness Center staff, the passion the youth have for helping their community, and the consistent structure and encouragement the YAC provided to the youth.

YAC members and staff have continued to volunteer their time over the summer months to operate the monthly school market.

Feedback on the YAC was collected at each meeting. Methods of data collection varied from surveys to guided discussions. Youth feedback was immediately incorporated into the YAC meeting structure, agendas, and activities throughout the year. For instance, healthy lunches were served at every meeting instead of every other, based on youth requests. Additionally, the staff brought in guest speakers and prepared presentations on topics of interest to the YAC throughout the year.

Plans for the Future/Sustainability

Underclassman members of the Heights YAC are committed to continuing the project. The school market will continue to run on the last Friday of each month and will do so April – September each year, as a sponsored project of the Heights Wellness Center. The market does not require additional funding to run, only volunteer time.

For the YAC to continue as it did last school year, more resources are needed, namely staff time and funding. MetroHealth is currently exploring funding opportunities and discussing how staffing needs can be met to continue the Heights YAC during the 2024-25 school year.



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