



## Prevention Research Centers

### Mini-Grants May Maximize Health in South Carolina

University of South Carolina  
Prevention Research Center



Lottie Spencer shows off V.I.M. Park in Sumter, South Carolina. The park, once blighted with weeds and beer cans, now has a walking trail and a new sign.

What if a few strategically given grants of \$15,000 each could help a community struggling with chronic disease and physical inactivity get on its feet?

That's the question the University of South Carolina Prevention Research Center (PRC) is trying to answer with a project in Sumter County, a county in the central part of the state that is home to Shaw Air Force Base. The project aims to jumpstart community members' potential for active and healthy lifestyles by offering mini-grants to community organizations, as well as advocacy training and support in building coalitions.

Researchers believe that in Sumter County, as in many other communities across the United States, residents have the desire but not all the resources and tools needed to reduce the burden of chronic disease.

A PRC telephone survey in 2005 found that almost half of the county's 100,000 residents don't get enough physical activity – at least 30 minutes per day of moderate-intensity physical activity on 5 or more days a week, or 20 minutes per day of vigorous-intensity physical activity on 3 or more days a week. Physical inactivity can contribute to obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and stroke. Hospitalizations from these conditions cost \$63 million in Sumter County in 2005 alone.

Granting small amounts of money to community groups allows for modest changes that can bring great results. For example, in the past three years, the grant money has gone toward building walking tracks and parks in five locations throughout the county.

These concrete changes in the environment make physical activity an easier choice for residents, researchers say. Furthermore, receiving grant money and creating neighborhood improvements gives community members some power and drive to get things done, and even small successes build momentum.

The grants go to neighborhood associations in underserved parts of the county or to groups representing underserved people such as senior citizens, low-income residents, or minorities. Community organizations can apply for money every year.

"It's bringing people to the table who haven't had a lot of opportunities to see concrete improvements in their communities," said the project's principal investigator, Patricia Sharpe. "Most of them have never applied for a grant before, have never had to manage a grant budget. It's been a learning process."

The grant money is given through Sumter County Active Lifestyles (SCAL), a coalition of health-interested Sumter County residents that is the lynchpin of the PRC's research project. The PRC pays for three staff members to coordinate the mini-grants and develop other active living projects for the county, such as walking groups and bicycle paths. The staff also conducts in-depth training sessions for community members on advocacy and grantwriting and holds regular meetings to talk about ways to increase physical activity in the county.

Juanita Britton, of the Rembert Area Community Coalition, wrote a grant application that was awarded \$15,000. Ms. Britton's organization used its mini-grant money to build a walking track in Rembert, a particularly resource-poor area in the northern, rural part of the county, far from recreation centers.



Seniors in Rembert, South Carolina, walk on a new track made possible by a mini-grant from the University of South Carolina Prevention Research Center. Left, Linda Pekuri, executive director of Sumter County Active Lifestyles, walks next to Juanita Britton, who wrote the grant to build the track.



Sadie Jenkins, 60, says having the walking track has improved her health and reduced the number of visits she makes to the doctor.

"We don't have a doctor, we don't have a drug store or a food store," Ms. Britton said. The only place for adults to walk for recreation was on the street, but stray dogs and traffic made that unsafe. "People always carry a stick" to fend off the dogs, she said.

Ms. Britton now brings the senior citizens' group she coordinates to walk on the new—and fenced-in—track every Wednesday. The group members say it has brightened their lives.

"I'm very glad we have this trail out here," said Sadie Jenkins, 60, who reports having fewer doctor's visits since she started walking regularly on the track. "Due to my health problems, I'm short of breath," she said. "Walking strengthens my lungs. I sleep better when we walk."

Because researchers have sought community input during each step of the project, county residents have built connections with each other and have used this group energy to fight inactivity. The county's government has also become involved. Its Recreation and Parks Department, which separately receives some grant money from the PRC, gives space to SCAL in its main office and coordinates grant projects with

SCAL to maximize the money's impact.

For example, at the Cherryvale Community Center, near downtown Sumter, Leona Green combined her mini-grant money from SCAL with money the county allocated from its PRC grant to create a new walking track and accessorize it with benches and trash cans.

Volunteers In Mission (V.I.M.) Park in downtown Sumter now has a walking track, and neighborhood residents are not only getting more activity but also volunteering to clean and monitor the park. Before the grant money, the park was overrun by weeds and polluted with empty beer cans, said grantee Lottie Spencer. Now, she has faith her community can get things done.

Broad Street Faith Warriors, the community group that received the mini-grant money, is working with churches and local government representatives to make other community improvements. Recently, the organization hosted a neighborhood reunion in V.I.M. Park.

"I'm glad the funds were there and that we were able to get that \$15,000 and do what we could. Now we haven't stopped," Ms. Spencer said. "This community is much better for it."

The PRC and SCAL are evaluating all of SCAL's outreach work and mini-grants by observing the number of people who use the new trails and conducting telephone surveys to measure overall activity levels and health behaviors in the community. So far, researchers say they have anecdotal evidence that people are using the trails. Data collection is ongoing, and more results are expected this year.

The PRC would like to see SCAL, a nonprofit organization, eventually become independent and expand its funding through grants from other sources. SCAL has begun to share its successes at statewide conferences, and other counties in South Carolina have shown interest in replicating SCAL's activities.

Although long-term changes in health status are difficult and expensive to measure, researchers say that the gains made in Sumter in the past few years are worth perpetuating. Building trust and growing the capacity of community members to make connections and to work together for healthy changes has a lasting impact, they say. The mini-grants, though small, could be the first step to a community taking charge of its future.



Hugh McLaurin III and his dog, Rhett Butler, walk on a track made possible by a mini-grant from the University of South Carolina Prevention Research Center. His church was one of several rural churches composing the Wedgefield Community Coalition that received the funds to build the track in a nearby park in rural Wedgefield. "It really has been a great experience to see the community come together and support a common project," Mr. McLaurin said.

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For more information, please contact  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion  
Mail Stop K-45, 4770 Buford Highway NE, Atlanta GA 30341-3717  
(770) 488-5395  
cdcinfo@cdc.gov  
<http://www.cdc.gov/prc>

