

1. How have you engaged, convened, and maintained relationships with your community/communities?

United General District 304 is a public hospital district serving residents of small towns and unincorporated rural areas in Skagit County. We focus on providing prevention programs and services to the community through our WIC program, Fitness Center, and Community Health Outreach Programs department.

In 2013, we were awarded a Community Transformation Grant and launched a **Healthy Community and Schools Initiative** to improve nutrition and physical activity environments in Skagit County. This three-year grant provided an opportunity for us to engage community members by assessing baseline conditions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. We conducted multiple assessments in the first year which revealed that underserved rural communities in our east county faced inequities in access to healthy foods and safe opportunities for physical activity. In addition, residents have limited access to public transit, preventive health care, family wage jobs, child care, and other amenities that other Skagit County communities enjoy. The most significant engagement during this time took place during Key Informant Interviews, which were conducted with community members including school administrators, a mayor, a county commissioner, parents, business owners, and health and social service providers. During these interviews residents shared their hopes and fears for the future, and discussed potential strategies for addressing issues faced by the community. Results suggested that east county residents were highly aware of the deep pockets of generational poverty and its consequences, yet confident in the historical self-reliance by which their communities were known. When reflecting on the community's capacity to reverse years of downward trends in high school graduation rates, employment, health, and prosperity, virtually all respondents agreed that starting with children was the key.

Concrete Resource Coalition and Youth Activity Day

Another tool for community engagement is United General's coordination of the Concrete Resource Coalition, through the DBHR-funded Community Prevention and Wellness Initiative. CRC mobilizes community members and stakeholders who implement evidence-based programs and strategies in the schools and community, to reduce substance use and abuse in the east county. CRC programming helps vulnerable students and families build skills for regulating behavior, managing stress, and building healthy families. Relationships with community members and stakeholders are developed,



WWU Mentors Teach Bicycle Safety at 2017 Youth Activity Day

maintained and renewed each summer when CRC coordinates Concrete Youth Activity Day. This event brings service providers and resources to the geographically isolated east county, for a one-day event that also includes games, hands-on nutrition and sports activities, and an outdoor movie for families. Around 500 community members and stakeholders take part in Youth Activity Day each year.

Kettering Foundation Research Exchange

In 2015 the Kettering Foundation invited United General to participate in a research exchange. This opportunity was based on the high level of community engagement shown in our AmeriCorps/VISTA volunteer's quarterly reports. The research exchange involved a two-year commitment and required a number of deliverables generated from community members' feedback. This project engaged citizens in: **1. Naming problems and opportunities** faced by the community by holding six Concern Gatherings; **2. Clustering community concerns** around common values and themes and selecting one central issue to address through ongoing efforts; **3. Framing three conflicting options** for addressing the central issue, by identifying the pros and cons of each option and writing an Issue Guide; **4. Holding a Community Forum**, where community members and stakeholders discuss the three options and the benefits and drawbacks of each; and **5. Looking forward and taking action** by researching organizations and identifying resources among our own communities and organizations.



Multi-generational Community Forum

The Kettering project allowed us to engage community members with great breadth and depth, and reinforced United General's commitment to east county residents. We maintain a consistent presence and cultivate relationships by participating in school, community, and municipal events. Our coordinators attend staff, school board, and PTO meetings to promote, celebrate and manage collaborative projects. We participate in many school events ranging from the Pumpkin Run to Mother & Son Lego Night, and often attend the free community dinners that are now offered each month during the school year. Staff have joined the community choir, volunteer and grow veggies in the community garden, and attend town council meetings. By being active participants in the civic life of the community we have stepped out of our silos and developed the trust of community members. Being a familiar face and knowing people on a first-name basis is more impactful than having a college degree and wearing an agency badge.

2. How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your community?

After conducting the assessments summarized in question 1, we followed up with community members and stakeholders to involve them as we developed strategies and programs. Based on feedback gained from Key Informant Interviews, we initiated a partnership with Concrete School District, the National Park Service, North Cascades Institute, Western Washington



Kids on a Farm Field Trip

University, and other stakeholders to develop a year-round continuum of nutrition, physical activity, literacy, and enrichment programming in the schools and community. The resulting programs, Concrete Farm to School and Concrete Summer Learning Adventure, are co-designed with school and community input and coordinated by United General. The intent is to reduce and overcome the challenges of geography, poverty and low educational aspirations that present barriers to student achievement. Now in their sixth year, the programs provide mentoring and prosocial involvement while

teaching soft skills disguised as fun hands-on activities.

Students aging out of elementary school have requested opportunities to continue participation in both programs; we have been able to leverage funds and co-design programs with student feedback to better meet their needs and interests as they progress in school! The Farm to School program benefits from the direction and oversight of a Community Advisory Team, representing a cross-section of the school and community. Lastly, the Kettering Foundation research exchange allowed us to engage a broader cross-section of the community, especially senior citizens. As a result of that effort we have moved forward with co-designed solutions to increase opportunities for youth, such as our emerging partnership with Boys and Girls Clubs.

3. How have you addressed systematic inequities that affect health (such as power differentials or racism) as part of your community engagement work?

This is a challenge for all organizations working toward greater equity. The primary tool for reducing power differentials in the communities we serve is our intentional practice of being visible and active participants in school, community, and municipal life and meeting people where they are, literally and figuratively. Our staff



The Ultimate in Community Engagement

members come from a cross-section of backgrounds including low-income, blue-collar, first generation college, and children of immigrants. This variety and diversity of experience allows us to avoid judgement and work more effectively with vulnerable community members. In addition, we educate the broader community about social determinates of health (or in plain English, how a person’s zip code and related environment affects their health and life expectancy). It is important for people to understand that poverty is the common denominator for poor health, and that our rural white community members face inequities because of their economic circumstances, just as other populations face inequities due to other factors. Through our work we try to empower vulnerable community members by providing tools and teaching skills for increasing self-reliance, self-efficacy, and self-determination. Rather than giving people fish, we teach them how to catch their own so that they can help themselves overcome power differentials related to generational poverty and negative stereotypes.

4. What about your organization’s way of working has made you successful? How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships? Include examples of how your staff and your board (if relevant) contributed to the culture and values that enabled your success.

A significant factor in the success of our organization is our collaborative and community-based approach. We actively seek out partnerships with organizations in order to design projects and programs that will have maximum reach and impact, while ensuring that all partners are able to meet their mission. We coordinate programs in the community rather than from our desks. Our organizational culture has a strong foundation based on the tenets and values of Health Education. Roughly 85% of staff is professional Health Educators who are well-versed in population health methodologies and apply creative approaches to changing policies, systems and environments. As our organization has grown and staff has developed long-term collaborative partnerships throughout the county and region we have felt more confident in our capacity to effect change and increase equity. Our staff maintains a healthy work/life balance which is encouraged by the organization. This contributes to a positive, productive and healthy workplace culture that enables us to approach our work with “Yes, and” rather than “No, but”.



Participating in the Mardi Gras Parade

5. What have been your most significant challenges, obstacles, and missteps?

Significant challenges we face are often related to the sheer geographical distance of our more isolated rural communities. For example, the work we do in the Concrete School District includes coordinating Concrete Summer Learning Adventure, a summer day camp. The district covers almost 2,000 square miles and includes Ross Lake National Recreation Area, North Cascades National Park, and parts of the Mount Baker/Snoqualmie National Forest. Creating a summer bus schedule for students in grades 1-8 from Birdsvew to Newhalem is a major challenge.



Making Pickles during Concrete Summer Learning Adventure

Obstacles we have faced that are becoming less of an issue include overcoming suspicion and earning the trust of community members. Early on, our motives were questioned and we were not welcomed with open arms when we approached partners such as the school district. By showing up, participating and leveraging resources to champion healthy changes with kids' best interests in mind we have earned credibility. The most serious missteps have occurred when we develop programs or plan projects without adequate input from stakeholders and the people we are trying to help. A successful approach has been to engage a cross-section of stakeholders, especially community members, in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of

projects. The Farm to School Community Advisory Team is a strong example of a stakeholder-owned and driven program.

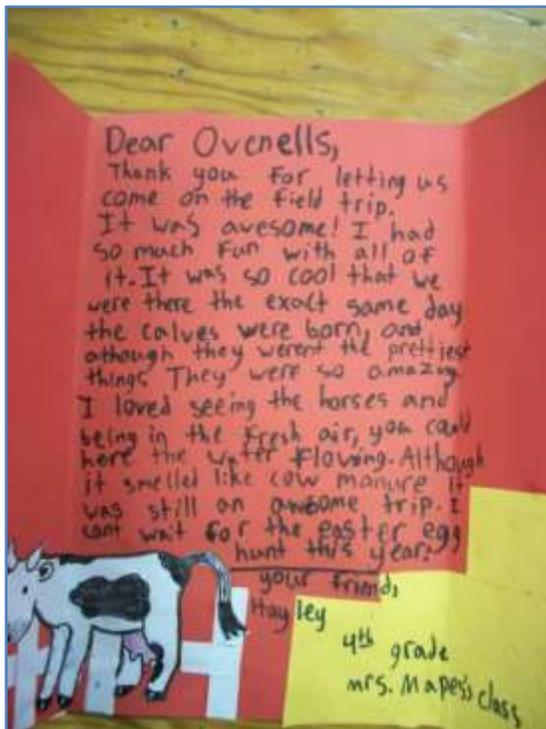
6. What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?

Within the past five to ten years in public/community health we have seen a mainstream paradigm shift from direct health education to a population health approach. The increasing body of knowledge on systemic inequities and their impact on the health of vulnerable populations has built momentum toward changing policies, systems and



Kids Cooking Greens

environments so that healthy choices are easier and more accessible to all. When new sidewalks are built in low-income communities and the residents are able to safely walk to work and school--we have greater hope about a more equitable future. When schools devote resources to implementing best practices such as alternative breakfast models that increase the percentage of students who eat breakfast--that gives us hope about a more equitable future. And when kids politely ask for seconds and thirds of greens they grew, cooked and served, we know they have a good start toward a healthier, more equitable future. Lastly, the increased awareness of equity in general and the steady movement toward a population health approach gives us great hope. We look forward to assessing and celebrating the long-term changes that result from our work.



Student Thank-You Note

