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**Title: Well Connected Communities Initiative Promotes Healthy Communities Through Youth-adult partnerships and the Power of Volunteers.**

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**Summary:** Youth and adults are working together to create a culture of health in their communities as part of the Well Connected Communities initiative, funded by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

**Situation:** The health issues facing Georgians are many and complex. Solutions to health and wellness problems cannot be derived from a single source, but, rather, must come from multiple sources and the synergy of multiple strategies. Many health initiatives focus just on behavior change, rather than considering the wider environment in which individuals make health and lifestyle decisions. Individuals, small groups, or organizations often implement interventions, but there is a growing need to identify collaborative action that can accelerate meaningful change on the community and systems levels. Adults and youth, working together with partner organizations can create connections, identify health issues, and provide support for community-directed change.

**Response:** Well Connected Communities is an effort to create a culture of health across the country. In partnership with National 4-H Council, Colquitt, Calhoun, and Washington counties are working to remove barriers and create communities where healthy choices are easy and available to all. The Well Connected Communities Initiative is supported by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the nation's largest philanthropy dedicated solely to health. Across the state, UGA Extension professionals work every day to provide research based knowledge to community members, and connectivity among community partners. Through this partnership, we are working to ensure our communities have access to local data that helps identify gaps and challenges to health and wellness, local policies that encourage healthy living, engagement from all sectors of public and private industry and government to help solve pressing issues, and networks of people and youth that want to make a difference. Since January of 2018, Colquitt, Calhoun, and Washington counties have worked to establish, expand, and engage members of their community in a health coalition. These coalitions are comprised of individuals from multiple sectors and collaborate to provide perspective, assess needs, and expand resources in the communities in which they serve.

New in 2020 and 2021, the UGA Well Connected Communities team planned and launched the UGA Extension Well Connected Community (WCC) Master Volunteer program. These volunteers are comprised of youth and adults serving together for the betterment of health in their communities. The goal of the UGA Extension Well Connected Community Master Volunteer training program is to prepare youth and adult volunteers to serve in the area of health, extend the community's capacity for equitable health-related initiatives, and enhance overall community health. WCC Master Volunteers were selected by local Extension office staff through a competitive application and interview process. Youth over the age of 18 and adults, alike, were encouraged to apply. Washington County served as the pilot county for the Master Volunteer program and successfully recruited six New in 2020 and 2021, the UGA Well Connected Communities team planned and launched the UGA volunteers (four youth and 2 adults) for this intensive training.

These volunteers are an extension of the University of Georgia (UGA) and their local Extension office and can represent UGA Extension in health initiatives, under the direction of local Extension Agents, following their successful completion of 40-hours of volunteer training and successfully completing a class project. The training course was offered through a hybrid framework that included asynchronous, synchronous, print, and face-to-face learning environments in their county as well as a state training at Rock Eagle 4-H Center. Following the successful completion of the volunteer training course, including class project and exams, volunteers are committed to taking action in their communities by returning 40 hours of volunteer service hours under the direction of their local Extension faculty.

**Results/Impacts:** Youth are now valuable members in each community coalition. Over the course of Wave 2, 11 youth were engaged in the Calhoun County Coalition, 5 in Colquitt County, and 8 in Washington County. Youth had an active voice in selecting topic areas and projects. The youth experience was documented using one on one interviews. Common themes from the interviews were that youth enjoyed working alongside peers and adults, youth felt like their opinions were truly valued, they liked learning about how their communities worked, and they appreciated opportunities to learn and work with others on the national level.

The WCC project has had several impacts on each participating community in Georgia. Just a few of those impacts are highlighted here: **Colquitt County:** The coalition reviewed needs assessment data and selected teen pregnancy as a pressing health issue in their community. This issue was particularly encouraged by the youth member of the coalition. Given the sensitive nature of this topic, a tremendous amount of time was spent building consensus and generating buy-in within the coalition and community. Together, the coalition researched and examined multiple youth education curriculums and selected one called “Choosing the Best” they thought would be accepted by the community. This curriculum has been referred to the schoolboard and the school board will make the final decision regarding implementation. **Calhoun County:** WCC provided a large basket with fruit and distributed at the concession stands (WCC sticker on the fruit) to promote healthy options at the concession area. If this is successful, the schools have agreed to make fruit available in the future during ball games at the concession areas. This has been very successful and at each game all fruit was distributed.

**Washington County:** Washington County was the first county to successfully recruit volunteers for the Georgia Well Connected Communities Master Volunteer Academy. Six volunteers successfully completed the 40-hour training and are now dedicated to providing 40 hours of service to their communities. The master volunteers graduated at a ceremony held in Washington County that was well attended by supporters and local leaders. This group of youth and adult volunteers has interest in many health areas, but have an additional specific focus on mental health. Upcoming planned activities include mental health rack cards, a mental health awareness 5k, and creating health promotion activities. See master volunteer section for additional information. Georgeanne Cook, Washington County FACS agent says “I am excited to see the adult and youth partnerships come together. The youth are very much leaders within our group and enjoy our adult volunteers and vice versa”. The Well Connected Communities Master Volunteers are on a path to create meaningful and lasting change in their communities.



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The University of Georgia 4-H program is the largest youth leadership organization in the state.

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