



Healthy Adams County pulls people together for better health

Kathy Gaskin, left, and Jennifer Gastley

STORY BY ASHLEY ANDYSHAK HAYES • PHOTOS SUBMITTED AND BY DARRYL WHEELER

For the last 25 years, led by a few dedicated employees and many more volunteers, an innovative community partnership has been at the forefront of better health in Adams County.

Healthy Adams County was established in 1996 by Gettysburg Hospital and the Adams County Council of Community Services. After witnessing data-driven community health successes in other parts of the country, the two entities conducted the first of many Community Health Assessments in Adams County.

"This was the first time we really tried to figure out what the health care and human service needs were in the community and how we could jointly address them," said Steve Niebler, a member of the ACCCS who would

eventually become the founding board chair of Healthy Adams County. Niebler shared his reflections in a column for the *Gettysburg Times* in January.

As the coalition took shape, Bill Taft, then a strategic planner at Gettysburg Hospital, was hired as its first executive director.

That first Community Health Assessment found resources to mitigate and prevent family violence were one of the top 10 areas of need in Adams County. At the time, Kathy Gaskin was working at Survivors Inc., in Gettysburg, as a medical advocate for those who had experienced domestic violence. She met Taft, who shared the plans that were taking shape for Healthy Adams County.

The two decided to form a domestic violence task force, which Gaskin chaired for eight years.

"I really enjoyed the work of the task force and bringing different parts of the community to the table to talk about the issue," she said.

When Taft began talking about retirement in 2006, he encouraged Gaskin to apply for the position of executive director. At that time, Gaskin had been working at Survivors for 13 years, and said her long history there made it difficult to leave. She ultimately decided to take the position, and while it was a tough decision, working at HAC was "so much less stressful and more

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enjoyable."

"It's something new every day," she said. "We take on so many different topics and priority areas."

During Gaskin's first years at HAC, a major healthcare issue in Adams County was access. The Community Health Assessment showed 15 percent of the county did not have access to high quality medical care for a number of reasons, including a shortage of physicians and hesitation among many providers to accept federal Medical Assistance, or Medicaid. This need led to a partnership with Family First Health, a federally-qualified health center (FQHC), which opened a site in Adams County to care for patients on Medicaid or without health insurance.

Access to care has improved drastically over the years. In addition to the medical and dental care provided by Family First Health, WellSpan established its own financial assistance programs for those in need, Gaskin said.

Conducted every three years, the Community Health Assessments have provided valuable insight into the health and wellness needs of Adams Countians, including resources to counter the climbing rates of obesity and diabetes, mental health issues, access to healthy food and many more.

"The health assessments have guided what we focus on," Gaskin said. "We want to make sure we're focusing on the right needs in the community."

The issues are tackled by a team of about 300 volunteers who form 12 task

forces, each focused on a specific need.

"I think it's always a challenge finding good task force leaders," Gaskin said. "We've been lucky once we've found a leader, a lot of them stay for a long time. It needs to be someone who is really excited about the issue and willing to lead."

Healthy Adams County task forces address their focus areas in a variety of ways: organizing walks, hikes and other fitness activities; screening films and holding community discussions on public health issues; conducting a plethora of prevention, education and awareness events; publishing resource guides; and collaborating with other local organizations to improve access to healthy foods for those in need.

"We're constantly thinking of new ways to engage with people," Gaskin said. With so many focus areas, programs and events, "we have to start prioritizing what we do and what we get involved with."

The glue that holds many of these projects and events together is Jen Gastley, HAC's administrative assistant. She was hired in 2003 and has worked for the organization ever since.

"I had just finished my degree at HACC (Harrisburg Area Community College), and I love Gettysburg and Adams County and wanted to stay in the community," she said.

Gastley does a little bit of everything, from administrative support to event planning to managing HAC's social media, navigating changes in technology and in the organization's focus areas along the way.

"I've really grown to love it and the community. I've learned so much," she said.

Since the COVID pandemic began, Healthy Adams County has been a

leader in the community response, coordinating food distribution with schools and food pantries, assisting with mobile vaccination efforts and arranging housing for homeless individuals who need to quarantine.

In addition to the many volunteer hours put in by task force members, HAC works closely with local agencies such as South Central Community Action Programs and the Adams County Office for Aging to ensure coordination of efforts.

"We feel like it's a partnership and not just us," Gaskin said. "None of the work that we do would be possible without our community partners."

Financial support for HAC's events and programs comes from the Gettysburg Hospital Foundation, which provides grants of about \$130,000 per year.

"We would not be here without the Gettysburg Hospital and WellSpan," she said. "It's nice to be able to work hand in hand with them to provide all those benefits to the community."

Over the last 25 years, the coalition has stayed true to its mission, responding to community needs and serving as an "innovator for the community," Gaskin said.

For Niebler, Healthy Adams County is "one of the proudest achievements of my career."

"Its work is not done, and may never be really finished," he said. "But this community is immeasurably better for the work of HAC and all it's done to make the lives of many, many people better."

