



Creating a Community that is Healthy by Design by Using a Health Impact Assessment

Using a health impact assessment as an advocacy tool to make Billings, Mont., a community that is healthy by design

SUMMARY

In 2005, given fast-paced development in the region, Montana's Yellowstone City–County Health Department worked with two local hospitals to conduct a community health assessment, which identified the area's most pressing health needs. Based on the results, the agency aimed to create a community that is "healthy by design."

To fulfill that goal, from 2007 to 2009, the Yellowstone City–County Health Department in Billings, Mont.—now known as [RiverStone Health](#)—engaged and guided communities and leaders in using health impact assessments to make decisions that affect public health.

A health impact assessment is a set of procedures and tools used to evaluate the effects of a proposed policy or project on the public's health. With some 60 assessments completed in the United States from 1999 to 2009, public officials and researchers are working to integrate the approach into planning and policy-making.

The Billings project included hiring a grassroots organizer to work with local and state partners to consider the health consequences of proposed policies and projects.

Key Results

Project staff cited the following results in a report to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), which funded the project:

- [RiverStone Health](#) completed three health impact assessments:
 - A retrospective review of the 2003 Growth Policy of Yellowstone County/City of Billings, which guides development decisions. The assessment suggested specific steps to expand access to healthy food, encourage physical activity and ensure public safety. (A summary of the assessment is available [online](#).)

The assessment recommended adding a section on community health to the Growth Policy, and RiverStone Health helped create such a section for the 2008

update of the policy. The section includes information on a multimodal transportation system and "complete streets"—roads that are safe for multiple uses, including bicycling and public transit.

- An assessment of RiverStone Health's plans for its new administrative facility. Conducted after construction had begun, the assessment recommended steps such as designating a room for breast-feeding. Project staff performed this assessment with the Healthy Places Advisory Committee, a group of local leaders formed in response to the 2005 analysis of community health.
- An assessment of a neighborhood aquatic center proposed by the Better Billings Foundation. Key recommendations—presented to the foundation, the Billings Parks and Recreation Department and the Billings Heights Neighborhood Task Force—included the following:
 - The city should annex a community center to the pool site.
 - The city should consider enclosing the pool so it can be used year around.
 - The city should study the expected increases in traffic and changes in traffic patterns expected to result from the pool.
- From September 23–24, 2008, RiverStone Health sponsored the Yellowstone County Health Impact Assessment Training. The event drew 32 people—some from traditional public health partners such as hospitals and Montana State University–Billings, and some from nontraditional partners such as the Chamber of Commerce and MET Transit, the Billings transit agency.
- From May 20–21, 2009, project staff held a Trailhead to Health Summit to engage and guide 108 community leaders, policy-makers and community members in:
 - Identifying overlooked and underused community health assets, ranging from parks and grocery stores to "neighborhood watches" and parent-teacher associations.
 - Launching the Healthy by Design Recognition Initiative, which encourages organizers of local events and activities to promote good nutrition, physical activity, public safety and environmental stewardship—and recognizes those who do.
 - Continuing to use health impact assessment as a decision-making tool.

Communications

- Project staff raised local, state and national awareness of health impact assessments through media outreach and presentations, and won recognition for local efforts to encourage healthy living. Media efforts included:

- Presentations on health impact assessments at the annual meetings of the National Association of County and City Health Officials, the Montana Association of Planners and the Montana Public Health Association.
- Articles and an insert in the *Billings Gazette*. The latter, titled *Becoming the Trailhead to Health* (April 2009), included articles such as "What Is a Healthy Place?"

In 2009 the National Association of County and City Health Officials designated Yellowstone County/City of Billings an ACHIEVE (Action Communities for Health, Innovation and Environmental Change) Healthy Community.

RiverStone Health received a three-year grant from the association to promote the ACHIEVE agenda, which includes convening community partners to develop and implement changes in policies and systems (see [Afterward](#)).

Lessons Learned

1. **Before promoting and performing health impact assessments, determine how to explain them clearly and succinctly.** Many people find the concept of such assessments difficult to understand, because they are a relatively new tool and few resources are available to explain them.

Because of those gaps, RiverStone Health found that some potential partners misunderstood the process. For example, the leaders of one organization turned down a proposal to conduct an assessment because they thought they would have to accept its recommendations. Another potential partner expected the process to produce a stamp of approval from RiverStone Health.

To bridge those gaps, the agency developed its own materials explaining assessments and enlisted champions who understood them, such as members of the Healthy Places Advisory Committee. (Hillary S. Harris/Project Director)

2. **Adapt the scope and format of health impact assessments to each project.** A strength of such assessments is their flexibility. However, that also makes finding a completed assessment for use as a model difficult, especially because a "how-to manual" is not yet available. In this project, RiverStone Health created a more formal, comprehensive document for the growth plan assessment, and informal briefs for the other assessments. (Harris/Project Director)

Funding

RWJF provided \$199,957 for this project.

Afterward

In response to the project, Billings' MET Transit conducted a media campaign promoting the role of transit in fostering a healthier community. And in December 2009, the city council agreed to develop a comprehensive multimodal transportation system.

RiverStone Health used the National Association of County and City Health Officials grant for ACHIEVE to create a Community Action Plan, an addendum to a Plan to Improve the Community's Health (PITCH), created before the RWJF grant. The Community Action Plan includes the goal of adopting a "complete streets" policy for the city of Billings, but to date the plan has not been formally adopted.

RiverStone Health is also using the grant to retain the grassroots advocate. The agency plans to conduct at least one assessment per year from 2010 to 2012, and to continue to educate and train community members on health impact assessments.

In 2009 RWJF started a program in collaboration with the Pew Charitable Trusts, called *Health Impact Assessment Portfolio*, to encourage the use of health impact assessment (HIA) to help decision-makers better assess proposed policies, projects and programs with respect to their impact on health, in order that they may avoid adverse health consequences and costs and improve health. It runs until 2014. A call for proposals was issued and those grants were funded in spring/summer 2010. A second call for proposals will be issued in early 2011.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

Reports

Health Impact Assessment Executive Summary. Billings, MT: RiverStone Health, 2008.