

## *Improving Kansans Health and Wellness across the Lifespan through Healthy Living Education*

### **The Situation**

It is no secret that America is aging, and this is especially true in our most rural and frontier areas of the state. While we cannot change such trajectories, K-State Research and Extension is able to influence the degree to which our community member's age with sustained or improved health, wellness, and vitality. Ultimately, improving the way we age can increase an individual's ability to stay in their home and community for a longer period time, reduce the need for institutionalized long-term care, and ultimately reduce the health care expenditures associated with increased dependence and presence of disease. K-State Research and Extension is dedicated to improving individual, family, and community health and we are actively implementing unbiased, research- and evidence-based education into our local Kansas communities. One such effort is *Keys to Embracing Aging*.

### **What We Did**

*Keys to Embracing Aging* is an evidence-based educational curriculum that helps individuals establish healthy lifestyle behaviors and maintain them across their lifespan in order to influence optimal aging. The curriculum, based on decades of research on centenarians and the world's *Blue Zones*, addresses 12 aspects of physical, social-emotional, financial, mental, and interpersonal health and wellness. Grant funded as a multi-state endeavor by the United States Department of Agriculture, this program was implemented across 42 federally-designated rural counties in Kansas and Kentucky throughout 2017 and 2018 for 12 months; participants attended one lesson per month for a year. In total, we reached 775 individuals representing a wide variety of ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and both genders. Through our Extension system's grassroots presence and representation at the county level, we were able to engage rural Kansans in interactive, purposeful learning alongside their peers and connect them with their local Extension office and other community-service providers through this initiative. It is this sense of belonging and integration within communities that can encourage individuals to remain engaged and productive members of their community.

### **Outcomes**

Because of participating in the *Keys to Embracing Aging* program, 100% of participants reported that they had increased their knowledge related to healthy aging and well-being. Further, while participants were actively engaged in the program, they reported plans to improve their lifestyle behaviors and choices, implementing strategies to accomplish their plans, and with many accomplishing those plans within their 30-day timelines. Upon completion of the program and at a 3-month post-program assessment of their progress, 90% of participants reported they were still using the resources they were given during the program sessions and 77% of participants had made lifestyle changes and were sustaining it. The areas where individuals reported

making the most improvement were: physical activity, nutrition, social activity, stress management, and taking time for themselves.

## Success Story

Though there are many, a particularly profound success story comes to us from Great Bend, which is located at the heart of Barton County. One participant in the *Keys to Embracing Aging* program was able to take what he had learned about health and wellness and truly incorporate the knowledge into his household. As a result, he and his wife began taking the time to prepare healthier meals and incorporate exercise into their daily routines. As a result of these changes, his wife lost over 30 pounds. This dramatic change in her life has improved her overall physical and emotional well-being, and she has been able to sustain her weight loss in the 6 months since the program has ended. The effects of her improved health have not only impacted her personal health and wellness, but have also been felt on their community. Since embracing a healthier lifestyle, she has become more engaged in their community through volunteerism and engagement, and helping to serve those less fortunate than she. The impacts have also been felt financially by the couple, as they report less medical expenditures and decreased frequency of physician's visits.

A second dramatic success from this program comes from Republic County, Kansas. One participant shared that she had been struggling with severe, debilitating depression for some time, and actually hadn't left her house in over a year. Once she began attending *Keys to Embracing Aging* and other programs offered by her local K-State Research and Extension office, she was able to obtain help to dramatically improve her life. She since reports that her depression has greatly improved, and she has become an involved, passionate member of her small community. These and other meaningful stories have come from participating in the *Keys to Embracing Aging* program delivered through K-State Research and Extension; we have truly seen dramatic differences in the lives and communities of participating Kansans.

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