

LASSEN FITNESS PROJECT
FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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November 15, 1999

Project Background

The Lassen Fitness Project was funded in July of 1997 through a grant of \$220,000 to the Northeastern Rural Health Clinics, Inc. (NRHC) from the James Irvine Foundation. The general purpose of the grant was to promote community wellness by increasing the physical activity and fitness of Lassen County residents. The two-year project ended in September 1999, having received a 3-month, no-cost extension from the foundation. This report describes the project, traces its history, and provides an evaluation of its performance as required by grant stipulations.

Purpose of the Project

The grant proposal to Irvine cited a combination of two primary factors as influences on the felt need for the project. These included:

- restructuring and fiscal stress in the health care industry, and a related need to emphasize preventative health care approaches in order to cut costs and involve patients in their own wellness;
- a growing problem of physical inactivity among adults, exacerbated in Lassen County by harsh winters, limited access to indoor recreational facilities, and little public attention to the desirability of physical fitness.

As proposed, the project targeted all residents of Lassen County, of whom 39 percent live at or below 200 percent of the poverty level, and 30 percent have less than a high school education. Project leaders were particularly concerned that the activities developed were appropriate to the community as a whole: seniors, adolescents, women, families, and those with illness or disability.

Context

Lassen County is located in the mountains and high desert of northeastern California, bordering Nevada on the east, Modoc and Plumas Counties to the north and south, and Shasta County to the west. It is a beautiful county with its high mountains, deep forests, and the second largest natural lake in California, and is prized for outdoor sports and activities. Its native sons and daughters are independent people, proud to live “on the frontier,” as they call it.

Among the largest California counties in area (4,547 square miles), it is one of the smallest in population (34,000 people, a quarter of who are prison inmates). Susanville (population 12,500) is the only incorporated city in this rural county and, as the county seat, provides the majority of the public services available to Lassen County residents. Those who live in the outlying areas have difficulty accessing these services--particularly during the harsh winters--due in part to the rugged terrain and in part to the lack of public transportation. Many Lassen County residents,

especially those who have come here to work in the prison system, feel cut off from California proper. In fact, Reno, NV, is the closest large city.

Lassen County has undergone dramatic changes in the past two decades due primarily to the expansion of prison facilities in the county: at present there is an expanded county prison and two large state prisons, with at least one federal prison expected to be built in the next few years. It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact that the prisons have had on Lassen County in terms of population growth, demographic changes, influx of new retail businesses, and strain on the existing infrastructure. To take population growth as an example: In 1990, according to the California Department of Finance, Lassen County's population was 27,515, of which 23,252 represented the "household population" and 4,263 people lived in "group quarters" (prisons and government barracks). Estimated county population in January of 1999 was 34,925 (25,124 and 8,935, respectively).

At one time, Lassen County made most of its money through timber harvesting and farming. Now government is the largest employer in Lassen County, accounting for over 50 percent of all jobs. The good salaries paid by the prison system are welcomed, but many local officials despair of providing adequate infrastructure and public services with the limited tax base associated with such heavy dependence on government jobs. Despite the social and economic changes that have been forced on the community in recent years, many public services are severely limited.

Project Leadership and Personnel

Northeastern Rural Health Clinics, Inc., is a private, not-for-profit health provider that has served northeastern California since 1977 and is a major provider of primary care in the region. On receiving the grant, NRHC located responsibility for the project in its Lassen Wellness Center, which housed a variety of NRHC health education programs and initiatives. The Wellness Center (since closed) occupied its own facility in Susanville. NRHC's central administration retained fiscal oversight of the project but was minimally involved in grant activities. Project co-directors were Shirley Fehr, a registered nurse who had recently completed a leadership fellowship with the Healthcare Forum, and Luz Engelbrecht, a health educator who had participated in the Women's Health Leadership Project. Both were long-time NRHC employees.

The co-directors began Fitness Project activities in October of 1997, and worked together until Luz Engelbrecht left for a new job in September of 1998. Contributing to her departure was a decision NRHC made (for financial reasons) in middle of 1998 to phase out its programs at the Lassen Wellness Center. In late October Jewelle Mapes joined Shirley Fehr as co-director of the Fitness Project, replacing Engelbrecht. Around this same time, Sheila Roach was hired as Administrative Assistant for the project, and played an important role through the end of the grant.

In April of 1999, with closure of the Wellness Center approaching, Shirley Fehr left the community to take a new job. Subsequent to her departure, Fitness Project activities were carried on by Sheila Roach and by Susie McNally, who served as project director during the last few months of the project.

In general, the various leadership transitions were handled in a smooth and effective manner. Considering the level of turnover and uncertainty, project activities during most of the grant sustained considerable momentum, though Fehr's departure meant that some envisioned follow-up did not occur.

Relationship to ComPAC

Just prior to receiving the Fitness Project grant, NRHC served as the fiscal agent for a separate project proposal that receiving funding from the California Endowment. That project sought to promote community collaboration and the vision of a healthy community by creating a new non-profit organization, the Community Planning and Advisory Council (ComPAC). The California Endowment award of \$225,000 to ComPAC covered roughly the same two-year period as the Fitness Grant.

Although separate projects, ComPAC and the Fitness Project collaborated on a number of initiatives. Early on, they agreed to pool their funds to hire a single evaluation team to work with the two projects. They also joined forces to produce a series of newspaper inserts under the "Healthy Lassen" heading. In addition, Fitness Project leaders participated in ComPAC's Holistic Health Initiative (one of 6 Healthy Community Initiative (HCI) groups organized under the ComPAC umbrella) which served as the Fitness Project's advisory board. Fitness Project activities were thus seen both as the result of the Irvine grant and as contributing to the overall goals of the ComPAC grant.

An effort by Fitness Project leaders to obtain the agreement of the ComPAC Board of Directors to "house" and support ongoing fitness activities after the Irvine grant ended was not successful. That action followed a period of time in which tension had developed between leaders of the two projects. For perspectives on the collaboration and conflict between ComPAC and the Fitness Project, see Section 2 of the interview report attached.

Evaluation

Evaluation Team

The UC Davis team that agreed in December, 1997, to perform the evaluation on both the Lassen Fitness and ComPAC projects comprises David Campbell, Director of the California Communities Program, and Joan Wright, a Cooperative Extension Education Research Specialist, both in the Human and Community Development Department at UC Davis. Over the years, both members of the team have taken part in numerous studies of a broad spectrum of community programs in California. We often work together in designing, implementing, evaluating, and reporting these studies

Evaluation Approach

A recent Aspen Institute newsletter noted:

One of the key predictors of whether or not a town can sustain a long-term development agenda is its ability to collect and analyze information about itself. Community-led evaluations can reinforce a local discipline of continuous learning, and as well can promote a sense of ownership of development programs by local residents. In addition, we at the Rural Economic Policy Program are noticing an emerging trend (an encouraging trickle) among some foundations that are treating evaluations less as an audit and more as an opportunity to build the capacity of grantees to assess their own organizations' operations.

In consulting with Fitness Project leaders, we understood that the purpose of the evaluation was to engage participants in a process of continuous learning related to Project activities and goals. The evaluation was intended to help the Project focus its goals, reflect on the actions taken to reach goals, assess progress, chart direction, and retain the flexibility to change as needed to meet challenges effectively. The key test of this type of evaluation is its validity and usefulness to the Project leaders, building their capacity for undertaking new initiatives.

The evaluation team shared with the Fitness Project leaders (and with ComPAC participants) a method for doing “outcomes assessment.” The method adapts the vocabulary and “program logic model” approach outlined in a 1996 United Way publication, *“Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach.”* We also shared ideas for data collection drawn from a 1997 publication of the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, *“Working Toward Community Goals: Helping Communities Succeed.”* The point of this was to enable all participants to use a common vocabulary and approach to clarifying program outcomes and collecting evidence of success.

Evaluation Activities

After an initial visit to consult with ComPAC leaders in December 1997--prior to signing the evaluation contract--we began work in April 1998.

Site visits: Both members of the evaluation team conducted four site visits, scheduled intermittently throughout the course of the project:

1. April 22-24, 1998 (meeting with Shirley Fehr and Luz Engelbrecht);
2. October 13, 1998 (meeting with Shirley Fehr and Sheila Roach);
3. February 25, 1999 (meeting with Shirley Fehr and Jewelle Mapes);
4. October 26, 1999 (meeting with Susie McNally and with Janet Lasick and Karol Merten of NRHC).

In addition, David Campbell made an informal site visit on August 11, 1998 (with Shirley Fehr and Luz Engelbrecht).

The primary purposes of the site visit meetings were to hear progress reports from Fitness Project leaders, clarify strategies for collecting evidence of accomplishment, collect important project documentation (including reports to Irvine and project materials), and consult with

project leaders on future plans. For example, during the second visit, we encouraged project leaders to distinguish between “casual” and “enrolled” participants in Fitness Project activities. The former are those who are exposed to educational materials, but who make no explicit commitment to a particular exercise program; the latter are those who do commit to a program, and from whom it will be possible to collect more extensive and precise indicator data.

Phone consultations: We communicated periodically by phone with project leaders, providing advice on evaluation methods and strategies and receiving status updates.

Interviews: At the close of the project, we conducted interviews with 69 Lassen County residents (see attached interview report), about half of whom (34) were identified as community leaders who had no recorded connection to the Lassen Fitness Project or ComPAC. Among these, we asked how many had heard of the Fitness Project, and what, if anything, they knew about it. Among those with connections to ComPAC and/or the Fitness Project, we asked for their perspective on how the collaboration between the two organizations went (for the specific questions, see the interview report).

Project Activities and Achievements

Intended Project Outcomes and anticipated activities

As articulated in the original grant proposal, the Fitness project had four goals:

1. To increase by 25% the community’s knowledge of the benefits of regular physical activity and exercise.
2. For individuals participating through project partners (i.e. physicians, workplaces, faith communities) to increase by at least 15% their participation in regular physical activity or exercise to at least five times per week.
3. To increase by 20% from year one to year two area businesses’ involvement as partners in a community wide fitness project.
4. To investigate the efficacy and effectiveness of a community-wide fitness project on individual and community health status.

During our original December 1997 consultation with project leaders, we advised that the effort to quantify the objectives like this was not likely to prove useful or effective, particularly in the case of the first and third objectives. Nevertheless, the objectives themselves appeared quite sound. In addition, it became clear that a related objective of the project was to make an impact on the availability and awareness of fitness facilities and opportunities. After consultation with project leaders, we agreed that the focus of the evaluation would be to assess evidence related to four questions:

1. Did the project increase understanding of community residents about the benefits of regular physical exercise?

2. Did the project increase the number of individuals who engage regularly in an exercise/fitness program?
3. Did the project succeed in documenting the benefits of regular exercise for individuals, employers, and the community?
4. Did the project succeed in increasing the availability and awareness of exercise-related facilities and programs in the community?

As originally conceived, Fitness Grant goals were to be pursued through five distinct sets of activities:

- the “Get Up and Get Moving” program with health care provider partners;
- community media;
- community collaboration;
- faith community partnership for education and fitness activity; and
- worksite partnership for education and fitness activity.

As a general strategy, the evaluation team advised project leaders to focus on initiating a limited number of activities during the first year, gradually building success that could be expanded upon later in the grant or over the longer term. This strategy was followed successfully by project leaders, who staged activities by phasing in the worksite and church partnerships after other activities had been initiated. In retrospect, given the eventual decision to close the Wellness Center, it might have been more appropriate to begin developing the worksite program earlier—which is the current view of NRHC administrators in reflecting on the grant achievements and limitations.

Actual Activities

The Fitness Project employed a wide range of educational approaches and engaged many sectors of the community, tailoring programs and ideas to particular audiences. A good example is the worksite fitness program, which was adapted to the expressed needs and circumstances of the participating employers. The leadership team’s programmatic flexibility and attention to detail allowed the project leaders to extend the project’s grasp well beyond its anticipated reach.

The rest of this section summarizes major project activities.

Get Up and Get Moving. In this program, physician partners (including physical therapists and chiropractors) referred clients to the Fitness Project. A letter was sent to more than 20 area health care providers and about 50% were signed up to participate by making referrals. Participation in the program grew from 13 referrals in April 1998, to 87 in October 1998, to 150 in February 1999. Those referred receive a packet of materials with a wide range of practical information on starting a personal fitness program, and a phone call from a Fitness Project leader. The materials covered a variety of substantive topics in a professional yet friendly and accessible manner. The general philosophy is expressed in the program’s title: just get going—in other words, anybody can do this.

A survey of participants in the program was conducted on a periodic basis (6 surveys over the life of the project). Forty-three completed the last survey, sent to 119 participants (see Appendix). Results from that survey suggest that the program was highly successful in encouraging regular physical exercise. Of the 43 respondents, 17 reported exercising five or more days per week and 37 reported exercising at least 3 days per week. A large majority (36 of 43) reported positive changes in their health since starting the exercise program. Open-ended comments reported high satisfaction with the program.

Community Media. Project leaders used a variety of media to reach the community with practical fitness information. These include paid radio ads three times a week, radio Public Service Announcements three times a week, a monthly “fitness person” profile featured in the weekly newspaper, the Healthy Lassen Newsletter (jointly put out with ComPAC as a quarterly newspaper insert), and a “Get Up and Get Moving Directory” that listed local places to go and things to do to be physically active. Each month there was a special “Fitness Theme” such as cardiovascular fitness, flexibility, family exercise, or strength training.

Our post-project interviews suggest that these activities were successful in gaining the attention of many community residents. Most people to whom we mentioned the Lassen Fitness Project recognized the name and associated it--very positively--with inserts in the paper, T-shirts they had seen around town, and a variety of health and fitness programs they had heard of and experienced. A typical comment went like this:

There was the Fitness Project -- that was really good. They had articles in the paper and did the fitness person of the month and that kind of thing. They picked people in different age groups in the community. ... There was a lot of good feeling in the community about that project -- people used to talk about it, with pride.

Of the 69 people interviewed for the ComPAC final evaluation, not one said anything negative about the Fitness Project and only 7 had never heard of it. Most people recalled either hearing about the Lassen Fitness Project during service club presentations or reading about it in the paper; relatively few people we spoke with reported taking part in its programs, however. Some individuals took a stab at saying what the project was about and fell somewhat short of the mark; most were able to extrapolate its mission from its name if they didn't know already.

Community Collaboration. One of the most effective ways the Project raised its community profile was by co-sponsoring community events. Project leaders contributed their time and talents to a wide range of existing events:

- Rails to Trails Festival
- A variety of Lassen Land Trails and Trust events
- Red Ribbon week
- Senior Citizens' Center for Fitness Walk
- Historic Uptown Susanville and Lassen County Fair for “Stroll Down Main”
- Lassen County Youth Tobacco Reduction float for County Fair parade

Community problem-solving activities in which the Fitness Project participated included:

- publishing a directory of fitness programs and facilities;
- surveying the community to determine what types of fitness activities people most enjoy;
- working with the Lassen County Transportation Commission to build a bicycle path in Lassen County;
- encouraging more family fitness activities at events such as the Children’s Fair and the 4th of July Community Picnic.
- supporting the Lassen County Tobacco Use Reduction Project in an effort to pass a Susanville ordinance banning tobacco displays;
- arranging with Lassen Community College to open their walking track to the community during the winter months;
- helping organize the Heart Felt Support Group;
- collaborating with the Women’s Health Center low-cost screening;
- initiating cooking classes, Tai Chi classes for seniors, and so on.

In recognition of the project’s leadership, Susanville’s Mayor and the Lassen County Board of Supervisors signed a proclamation declaring support for the Surgeon General’s Report on Physical Activity and Health and decreeing Lassen County and the City of Susanville as *“A Fitness Conscious Community Promoting Regular Physical Activity for the Health and Well Being of Families and Individuals.”*

Overall, the project leaders created multiple opportunities to spread the word about the importance of fitness, while supporting health and fitness related initiatives throughout the community.

Faith community and worksite fitness partners. This aspect of the project was considered a key component, but was also the most difficult to implement. The idea was to sign up church and workplace sites as partners who would help to distribute educational materials and sign up interested individuals for the Get Up and Get Moving program. Liaisons at each site would work with Fitness Project leaders. As part of the partnership, the Blue Cross health check-up would be offered to participants. Project leaders hoped that the check-ups could be repeated at periodic intervals, allowing a measure of how involvement with fitness activities impacted individual health. They also hoped that these sites could continue the work after the grant ended.

Before contacts with churches and worksites could begin, project leaders had to create informational materials, establish the Get Up and Get Moving program, and get the Blue Cross health checkup set up. The first two of these tasks were accomplished relatively swiftly during the early months of the project, but the latter experienced unexpected delays. Lassen Community Hospital agreed to host the Blue Cross program and complete the necessary set up work, but did not get the program up and running until well into the Fitness Project’s second year. This delay, along with the press of other project activities and the departure of Luz Engelbrecht, slowed progress considerably.

Despite the setbacks, project leaders eventually pursued implementation. Initial contacts with churches revealed a reluctance on their part to sign up as official partners. Still, some were open to receiving informational materials and other support. This included the local Seventh Day Adventist church, with 60 parishioners, which was reported to be very happy with the nutrition classes offered by the project through the church, according to one church member interviewed. None of the four religious leaders from different denominations whom we interviewed had embraced the opportunity to take part, although three acknowledged that they had received an invitation.

Worksites proved to be more interested. Beginning in late October, 1998, and continuing beyond the departure of Shirley Fehr in April, 1999, ongoing contacts were established with many of the largest worksites in the county. These partners included Sierra Pacific Industries (98 employees), Lassen Works (44 employees), Lassen Family Services, the Susanville Fire Department, Lassen Community Hospital, Northeastern Rural Health Clinics (80 employees), and the U.S. Forest Service (70 employees).

Project leaders went out of their way to adapt the program to the expressed needs and circumstances of the participating employers. Common activities across the sites included: delivering talks on fitness at regular employee meetings, distributing the fitness directory, identifying aspects of health and fitness that were of most interest to the employees, and providing information on the checkup center. At two sites project leaders worked with the employer to explore the potential of payroll deduction programs for membership at local health clubs. One site invited project leaders to create a lunchtime weight watchers club. Project leaders worked with the Fire Department to petition the City of Susanville to support the cost of Blue Cross checkups for its employees and to allow workout time as part of the regular work day.

Eventually, over 100 employees took part in the Blue Cross checkup program, which was offered on three different occasions and at three different sites in late spring of 1999. Participants received physicals, a health screening, and a self-survey, then met with counselors to receive referrals and suggestions. Most employees participating were from the Forest Service and the Fire Department. The Forest Service already had a staff member assigned to fitness-related responsibilities, making it easier to sustain ongoing activity. In the case of the Fire Department, the Fire Captain is very interested in promoting employee fitness (he was also selected as fitness person of the month).

Because of the delay in setting up the Blue Cross checkup, no comparison of individual health data before and after an exercise program could be performed during the course of the grant. In general, project leaders found this part of the project valuable, but quite challenging. They noted that it takes a lot of work to get employers on board. Considering this fact and the other obstacles encountered, they feel they made as much progress as possible toward this objective. NRHC administrators feel that this part of the grant deserved greater attention early on, and express disappointment in not seeing sustained worksite fitness programs in place as a continuing legacy of the grant.

Use of Residual Funds

Due to the departure of project leaders before the close of the project, some originally budgeted funds for personnel remained unspent as the end of the grant neared. With approval from the Irvine Foundation (letter from Marty Campbell dated 9/1/99), these funds were reallocated to the following purposes:

\$5,299.40	Developing a “Healthy Lassen” website
\$5,000.00	Constructing soccer and ball fields for the community
\$9,000.00	Scholarships to support participation of needy children in youth sports and recreation programs

In addition, \$5,000 was allocated to cover remaining payment to the UC Davis evaluation team and for personnel costs after the September 30th grant-closing date.

The money for ball field construction and youth sports scholarships will help continue the work of the Fitness Project beyond the grant period. Specifically, it helps meet the goal of expanding access and facilities for fitness-related activities for families and youth.

The website is a joint venture with ComPAC and the Susanville Public Library. It will include the community resource directory published in October, 1999 (and updated bimonthly) by ComPAC and a calendar of local events, especially those related to health and fitness. It could become a site where many of the educational materials produced by the Fitness Project are collected, as well. The website will be maintained at the library; funds cover initial set up and keeping it operational for at least 12 months.

Continuity of Project Activities Beyond the Grant Period

Project leaders have been relatively successful in securing the adoption of particular project elements by other community agencies. For example, the Blue Cross check-up will continue to be offered periodically by the hospital; the hiking component by Lassen Land and Trails Trust; and Healthy Strides (a morning and evening walking program) by Susanville Parks and Recreation. Jewelle Mapes may be able to continue other elements in her role as health educator for Northeastern Rural Health Clinics. And some of the popular classes that the Fitness Project helped to sponsor, including nutrition and Tai Chi, are expected to continue.

Except in those workplaces where an existing staff person has fitness responsibilities, or where a particular supervisor takes a strong interest, there is no indication that the worksite program will continue.

Conclusions and Discussion

Summary of Achievements

Despite experiencing setbacks and turnover in leadership, the Fitness Project compiled an enviable record of activity and achievement. Under the able leadership and teamwork of the

original project co-directors, the relatively simple idea behind the Fitness Project blossomed into a variety of educational activities and community collaborations. This project seems to epitomize what can be accomplished when foundation funding supports the ablest of existing community leaders to accomplish a fairly focused set of objectives. Because the grant provided funds for programs and staff support, the Fitness Project related to the community from a position of strength—as a resource with something to offer rather than as a way of imposing a new set of objectives that drain energy from existing leaders and volunteers.

Shirley Fehr in particular is to be commended for guiding the project successfully in the midst of a shifting and uncertain organizational context. As reflected in repeated comments made in our community interviews, she brought to the project energy, skill, and a wide range of community connections. Her ability to articulate a clear vision of the project is evidenced in the Fitness Project's written materials and media presentations.

A key strength of all the Fitness Project leaders was their ability to communicate this focused vision in a way that encouraged other community members to contribute to the project's goals. Sometimes this occurred in small ways (e.g., offering a site for a community meeting) and other times in more significant ways (e.g., designing a Master's thesis that contributed to the project goals).

As evidence by the detailed reports prepared for the Irvine Foundation, project leaders were very conscientious in documenting activities and outputs and in searching for meaningful and feasible outcome data. Over the course of the project, they collected data in a variety of ways, including participant surveys, content analysis of local media, and a facility survey. We were impressed by their ability to make appropriate mid-course adjustments in the data collection strategy as the project proceeded.

Fulfillment of Objectives

The following section summarizes the evidence of accomplishment related to each of the four basic objectives.

Did the Fitness Project increase understanding of community residents about the benefits of regular physical exercise?

An answer that would satisfy this question completely is beyond the scope of this evaluation. But there are multiple indications that the project was indeed very successful in achieving this goal. The exemplary efforts of the project leaders in preparing and distributing fitness related information is well documented. This included both the targeted education of the individuals who took part in specific Fitness Project programs and the use of public media to promote fitness ideas in the community at large. The quality of the educational materials and the variety of community outlets used to get the message out are exceptional. The fact that 62 of our 69 interviewees had heard of the Fitness Project speaks well of its visibility in the community.

The degree to which the educational activities reached new audiences, or significantly expanded the understanding of those already involved with fitness activities, is harder to ascertain. We do know that many of the community's largest employers agreed to be partners with the program, which surely meant that the fitness message reached many new ears. While it might be feasible in the abstract to devise measurement strategies to provide a more definitive answer, it would likely be much more costly than this grant allowed for and could only have been accomplished at the cost of cutting other valuable project activities.

Did the Fitness Project increase the number of individuals who engage regularly in an exercise/fitness program?

We know for sure those 150 individuals in the Get Up and Get Moving Program represented an increase. Responses to the surveys of Get Up and Get Moving participants suggest that a primary benefit of the project was in *motivating* individuals to initiate and maintain a personal fitness program. In this regard, personal support and motivational rewards such as free t-shirts were important. We also know that the project help sponsor a wide range of fitness-oriented community events attended by many members of the community.

Whether regular fitness regimes were adopted by the hundreds of others reached by the church and worksite fitness programs, community presentations, and media messages is unknown. At a minimum, they were introduced to the idea and provided with the opportunity. And it is likely that a good many of them did increase their physical activity.

Did the Fitness Project succeed in documenting the benefits of regular exercise for individuals, employers and the community?

If by documenting one means pulling together the best available information and making it available, the answer is that the Fitness Project certainly did succeed in this area. If it means measuring health outcomes, the answer is that it succeeded partially. The ongoing surveys of Get Up and Get Moving participants reveal substantial health improvements (self-reported) as a result of exercising regularly. The more ambitious goal of tracking a sample of individuals using the measures in the Blue Cross Health check-up could not be accomplished due to the late start-up of this program. If repeat checkups were done for those who did receive checkups in 1999, it would still be possible for the community to pursue this goal.

Did the Fitness Project succeed in increasing the availability and awareness of exercise-related facilities and programs in the community?

There is ample evidence that it did succeed in this respect. The Fitness Directory (now incorporated as part of a larger community resource directory that will be maintained by CompAC on the Healthy Lassen website) made information available to the public and to participants in the wide range of fitness project activities. Presentations to community leaders raised awareness of fitness issues and concerns over facilities. The project leaders lent their support to the effort to construct a bike trail in the county and to eliminate vending machines for cigarettes. Residual funds for the project are being used directly to support facility expansion

and youth access to fitness-related activities. A more full-fledged effort to build a coalition to support expansion of and access to fitness facilities did not come about, but the groundwork was laid.

In sum, we believe that the project has been quite successful and is sufficiently meritorious to warrant broader publicity and attention. As one leader interviewed put it, “That was probably one of the more productive initiatives they (i.e. ComPAC) had. The fitness program in the community is really at a higher level than it was before.”

The set of educational materials developed by the project would have wide applicability, and the relative simplicity of many program elements makes them replicable in a wide range of settings. The one ingredient that is not easily replicable is the leadership team that guided the project. Unfortunately for Lassen, both of the original project leaders have now left the county.

Lessons Learned

Following are brief reflections based on our involvement as evaluators with this project.

- The fitness project struck a responsive chord and was popular, even in a county not known for fitness consciousness and wary of spending money on anything but the essentials.
- Having a home base in the NRHC’s Wellness Center had both good and bad points. It helped project leaders get down to business quickly (since no new overhead was being created) but it also was responsible for affecting and/or aborting some of the late activities due to the decision to close the Wellness Center.
- Having trusted and able leaders with reserves of social capital already built in the community is a big aid to any project, especially when those leaders are sensitive to bringing new voices and interests into the activities. Finding ways to retain such leaders in the community should be an important priority.
- There is no substitute for having dedicated project staff to spearhead a programmatic effort and to develop the personal connections so vital to motivating regular fitness activity.
- The attempt to promote workplace fitness programs that sustain themselves beyond a grant funded initiative is not easy—workplaces either have existing programs or else they require the staff support the grant provides. The Lassen County experience suggests that very few workplaces or churches have the capacity to expand into a fitness program without substantial external support;
- The collaboration between Fitness and ComPAC demonstrated the strengths and limitations of such efforts—pooling resources helped make certain things happen, but also created some confusion in the minds of some members of the community who were not sure where one project began and the other ended.

Final Considerations

We close with a few thoughts related to the funding of projects like the Lassen Fitness Project.

- Everyone sings the praises of preventative health, but the fiscal pressures on health care agencies make it difficult for them to continue investing in preventative health strategies.

Whether or not these strategies will eventually “pay for themselves,” up-front funding for initiating programs has to come from somewhere, and it is not likely to come from financially strapped local service deliverers, particularly in rural counties.

- Fitness educators can inform, promote, advertise, and otherwise cajole, but there will always be limits on how many individuals respond. Often they will spend time preaching to the choir. Demand cannot be created easily, nor can impressive results be easily documented over the life span of a short grant.
- The effort to attach outcomes assessment expectations onto small grants should be approached with greater caution and more deliberate communication than is typically the case. Unless expectations are clearly specified, many grant recipients are tempted to read unrealistic demands into grant language, promise more than can be delivered, and then end up delivering less than they might if the expectations had been more realistic. Funders, evaluators, and project leaders need to discuss these issues jointly; to balance concerns for utility, feasibility and cost carefully; and to target resources wisely.

As indicated at the outset of this report, our approach to the evaluation sought to increase the project leaders’ capacity to gather information, reflect on experience in an ongoing fashion, and change directions accordingly. This necessarily involves the evaluators in conversations in which key decisions about direction are made. The benefits of this engagement are in bringing an independent perspective to the project leaders and in ensuring that the evaluation is dealing with actual problems and concerns rather than with abstract measures that have little relevance to the day-to-day activity. But this engagement also carries a risk that the evaluators will be seen as too involved in project decisions, or that different stakeholders may use the presence and/or advice of the evaluators to deflect or pinpoint blame.

In working with the Fitness Project, we have experienced both the strengths and limitations of this approach. On the one hand, project leaders were enthusiastic about working with us, and quick to draw on and use our advice and suggestions. They report that they found the consultations useful. On the other hand, by working closely with these leaders, we were unaware, at critical early junctures, of the interests of NRHC administrators whose perspective on the project differed significantly with the leaders’ views.

LASSEN FITNESS PROJECT
Perspectives Gleaned from Interviews with
ComPAC participants and Community Leaders¹

Prepared by Cathy Lemp, Research Associate

Two years ago, the University of California at Davis was retained to perform evaluations on both the Lassen Fitness Project and the Community Planning and Advisory Council. In keeping with the collaborative nature of the partnership in many areas, we are using one study as a means of examining the performance and the community perceptions of both projects. The observations offered here are drawn from a larger survey of ComPAC (Community Planning and Advisory Council), performed in August - October 1999. Two versions of the interview protocol were used, one for people who had direct contact with ComPAC and one for community members who might have no knowledge of it at all. The question for the ComPAC group (35 people) was designed to elicit information on the partnership between the Lassen Fitness Project and ComPAC, and was worded as follows:

ComPAC and Lassen Fitness collaborated on funding this evaluation and other healthy community projects. How did that partnership work out?

This question, appropriately for its context, assumed a familiarity with the Lassen Fitness Project on the part of the respondents and thus made no effort to focus more pointedly upon the project itself. The questions on the protocol administered to the Community group (34) were put differently:

*Have you heard of the Lassen Fitness Project? How did it come to your attention?
Could you say how Lassen Fitness has contributed to the healthy community idea?*

Although these questions do request more information of the respondent, the subjects interviewed had no special reason to know about the Fitness Project as the ComPAC group did. Accordingly, they were often able to answer only the first two questions.

In consequence, and since the Lassen Fitness Project was not the primary subject of this set of interviews, the impression we gained of its reception in the community was somewhat tangential and by no means comprehensive. We recount here the picture provided by the comments we did receive, since they help round out the overall understanding of the project and its impact.

¹ Text in **bold** represents a summary of an interview statement as prepared by our research associate.

1. Community Perceptions of the Fitness Project

Most people to whom we mentioned the Lassen Fitness Project recognized the name and associated it -- very positively -- with inserts in the paper, T-shirts they had seen around town, and a variety of health and fitness programs they had heard of and experienced. A typical comment would go like this:

There was the Fitness Project -- that was really good. They had articles in the paper and did the fitness person of the month and that kind of thing. They picked people in different age groups in the community. ... There was a lot of good feeling in the community about that project -- people used to talk about it, with pride.

Of the 69 people interviewed for the ComPAC final evaluation, not one said anything negative about the Fitness Project and only 7 had never heard of it. Most people recalled either hearing about the Lassen Fitness Project during service club presentations or reading about it in the paper; relatively few people reported taking part in its programs. Some individuals took a stab at saying what the project was about and fell somewhat short of the mark; most were able to extrapolate its mission from its name if they didn't know already.

The campaign to involve the religious community must have enjoyed some measure of success since one person we interviewed, a Seventh Day Adventist, was very happy with the nutrition classes offered by the project through her church. However, although three of the four religious leaders to whom we spoke acknowledged that they had received an invitation to take part in Fitness Project referrals and activities, none had embraced the opportunity.

Given the small sample of opinions available to us, we may have missed some significant areas of success, alluded to by a ComPAC member:

That was probably one of the more productive initiatives they had. The fitness program in the community is really at a higher level than it was before. He sees much more involvement with the Forest Service, with the city government administration--an interest in doing workplace fitness.

One of the primary concerns we heard expressed about Lassen County throughout this final evaluation was that there were few constructive activities open to the community's youth, with the result that petty crime and teenage pregnancy had become significant problems. In view of that, this observation from another ComPAC member seems very positive:

She's not as acquainted with the Lassen Fitness Project, but, from what she's seen -- she works at her church and then some of the youth participated in that, which she thought was great. So she's seen that it has had a penetration in the community and she sees T-shirts occasionally with "Lassen Fitness Project" on them -- a different range of people from young people to older people, and so she thinks that project, from the limited amount she's seen of it, has been successful. She would like to see things like that continue. They live in an outdoor area that's just beautiful, and she

thinks it's just great that any kind of a project can get some of these kids off their couches and get them out there enjoying this beautiful area that they live in.

Many people referred to the "Healthy Lassen Insert" -- if not by name, then by describing it -- and those people tended to know how many times a year it came out. The community seemed to associate it more readily with the Lassen Fitness Project than with ComPAC, although both collaborated in producing it. One resident was summarized like this:

Very positive. ... (T)hey have a quarterly insert that goes into the newspaper which is called Healthy Lassen. They were able to work on that mutually to get that published and sent out to -- she thinks it is 14,000 homes! On a quarterly basis, with their newspaper.

A number of younger adults, both single and with families, reported taking part in runs and walks held by the project, and they enjoyed them very much. But among the most enthusiastic fans we encountered were senior citizens and those who work with seniors.

The senior center did a couple of projects with Lassen Fitness and they were very helpful. They worked together on a walk, a "Step Out for Senior Centers," two different years.

Apparently the Lassen Fitness Project introduced legions of older adults to the delights of Tai Chi. And these people are heartbroken -- this is not an exaggeration -- that the program is no longer available to them. One of the community members who works at a senior center describes the situation in her interview:

They came down and used their facilities to do some of their programs, and she understands they lost their funding. They (the seniors) were very unhappy about that. The last thing Lassen Fitness was doing were the Tai Chi classes, which is extremely beneficial to the elderly. It was surprising: when they brought the Tai Chi down there, a number of their seniors became involved. And she was not even aware of the Tai Chi until they brought it to their site. And now she sees on TV where this is a great help to seniors in helping to keep their balance, and to keep their joints fluid -- and she was just very disappointed to hear that the program is no longer available.

2. The Lassen Fitness/ComPAC Partnership

The majority of the people we talked to in the ComPAC group showed greater recognition of the Fitness Project than their counterparts in the community, but most of them accepted it as a benign influence on the community that was outside their immediate sphere of interest. Other than to assume the partnership between the two grant-funded organizations had gone well, they had little to say about it. People we interviewed in both groups associated the Fitness Project very strongly and positively with Shirley Fehr, a name that kept coming up with

admiration, affection, and respect from every part of the community. Luz Englebrecht was another founder whose work and dedication received considerable praise.

The Fitness Project was closely identified with ComPAC's holistic health group.

Yes, they were with the Holistic Health group. In fact, they hosted most of the meetings and did up minutes, and the group helped Lassen Fitness with various projects, reviewed their directory . . . Most of the group went on to become members of their Get Up and Get Moving Club. She went walking and did tai chi. She's going to miss that project -- they had a lot of good programs and it's hard to do that stuff on your own. She met a lot of nice people.

Another member of ComPAC took a less sunny view of the arrangement:

The Healthy Community initiative of ComPAC was written into the Lassen Fitness grant as the advisory board for the grant. The advisory board wasn't consistent; people floated in and out, joining other initiatives according to what projects were underway or being pulled out by participating agencies as their workloads fluctuated.

When the partnership began, the relationship between the two entities seemed to run fairly smoothly, barring the predictable difficulties of establishing an initial structure. One early observer saw it this way:

... when it first began, it was a true collaborative -- they needed ComPAC's help and ComPAC needed them and it was a spirit of friendship and collaboration. However, she thinks, because of ... internal political and financial things on the part of Northeastern that happened, [both organizations] kind of got caught in that cross-fire.

Our interviews picked up fairly heated opinions of what may or may not have caused some difficulties between the two groups. While no one faulted the Fitness Project's basic mission or even the implementation of that mission, several people mentioned that there were sometimes visible and audible clashes when the Holistic Health Initiative convened after ComPAC's monthly community meetings. Naturally this prompted some speculation on the part of observers, many of whom found it disturbing and off-putting and some of whom cited it as the reason they stopped attending ComPAC meetings altogether.

At the same time, events occurring within the Fitness Project's parent organization were causing considerable disruption. According to one participant:

Northeastern Rural had their own internal management changes. And the Wellness Center at that time was being closed because of finances. And that impacted community, in that it made it more difficult to explain -- Well, here you have a healthy community health and fitness, and yet your Wellness Center is closing. But again, she doesn't think that was intentional, she thinks it was a financial decision based on some other history of things that had gone on before.

In any case, there is general agreement that internal troubles, whatever the cause, never interfered with either project's ability to serve the community in many ways, singly and together. As one person no longer involved with ComPAC recalls with reference to the partnership:

... a few things that the Fitness grant did extremely well. They invited the police community, because that was part of their model, and so they had a *lot* of players in *their* Initiative for the Health and Fitness and Wellness that ComPAC didn't have. And ComPAC *got* that as a result of that Holistic Health Initiative going forward. So she thinks that was a benefit to

community and a benefit to both of the collaborative players, that they ended up getting more bodies, so to speak; more momentum, more energy.

As we have already mentioned, one of the most conspicuously successful collaborations between the Fitness Project and ComPAC -- and generally a third partner as well -- was the Healthy Lassen insert. The two organizations also took part together in holding gatherings, or fairs, that were open to the community and enabled residents to view a cornucopia of opportunities to better themselves and their surroundings. Both organizations contributed effort toward compiling the resource directory, recently completed. There were undoubtedly many more projects successfully undertaken and completed by the partnership, but they didn't come up during the interviews on ComPAC.

3. A Future for the Lassen Fitness Project?

As we touched briefly on the Fitness Project during this series of interviews, it was plain that a number of community members were unhappy with the loss of the program. It seems that the Fitness Project is something that many had come to depend upon in the community, even if they weren't yet actively involved. One man we spoke with was quite dejected on behalf of his youngsters:

... Lassen Fitness has done a lot of good up there. And they have presented their program at Rotary, of which he is a member. He thought it was a great deal and he was quite alarmed to hear that it's no longer -- it's non-existent now, the grant run out. He hopes they try to find another grant because they have done a very good job in what little time they were in existence.

Closing down so popular a program is a sad task. The current Executive Director of ComPAC, charged with performing the last rites for the Lassen Fitness Project, is in no rush to declare it entirely defunct. As she told us:

Yes, they did have a little announcement in the paper and they've been notifying people on and off. But they haven't done anything real -- bold, mainly just because what the Fitness Project has done is that they have made connections with some other groups, and other groups are taking over certain things. There was a walking program that the city park department is taking over. There was another program, a Tai Chi class for senior citizens, which the lady who's teaching it is trying to keep it going. That was a wonderful program. It was outstanding. They really enjoyed it. And she does know that the hospital has been searching for special programs and they're going to try to do some things for seniors too, keep them active and fit. And because they know the Tai Chi class has been so well received, if they do get some funding she's sure that they will assist in keeping them going.

Similarly, when we asked whether there was hope of anything taking the Fitness Project's place, one of the members of ComPAC's Holistic Health Initiative, responded with:

Not that she knows of. But that's something else that Holistic Health could take on, just calling up some of the people that were doing this and ask if they'd like to lead a walking group, and maybe scrounge up some money and advertise it.

So it does appear that it will take more than the loss of a single grant, even coupled with the elimination of Northeastern Rural Health Clinic's Wellness facility, to eliminate the substance of the Lassen Fitness Project's mission. We sincerely hope that the community's efforts will be successful.