

Healthy Kids **Healthy Communities**

BUILDING HEALTHIER TOMORROWS

Healthy Kids Socorro County

Tom Hyden, who lives south of Socorro on a farm near San Antonio, calls himself the Tom Sawyer of the food-system movement in Socorro. "I try to convince other people how much fun it is," Hyden said with a chuckle, referring to how the infamous character in Mark Twain's book charms people into doing his chores.

So far Hyden's convinced three other farmers to join him in growing one crop for the Socorro Consolidated Schools to distribute through its school cafeterias. The farmers picked napoli carrots, which Hyden calls unbelievably sweet. They chose a vegetable that would appeal to kids, grows well and can easily be stored in cold storage.

The goal is to create a more comprehensive food system in Socorro County, according to Hyden. He said there are about 26,000 irrigated acres in the county and 19,000 is full of alfalfa.



"We're trying to broaden the food system to include vegetables and fruit," he said. "The way we're doing that is encouraging and supporting community and school gardens. The other focus right now is to try to supply the school district with locally grown vegetables."

Key Community Successes

October 2011 - June 2013

- 3 of 5 Socorro Consolidated elementary schools participated in the 5.2.1.0 Challenge this past year
- Installed salad bars in 1 elementary school as well as the middle and high schools
- Established edible gardens in 1 elementary school
- Conducted regular fruit and vegetable tastings in 1 elementary school
- 2 elementary schools participated in National Bike to School Day in May 2012 (these 2 schools also maintained regular bike to school programs)
- Established partnership between local farmers and school district food services directors to incorporate locally-grown produce into school meals
- Increased community access to locally-grown produce through year-round farmer's market and use of commercial kitchen to make value-added food such as jams and salsas

Community transformation in Socorro has, to date, reached 80% of Socorro Consolidated elementary schools (911 students)

Socorro is a rural, agricultural community about an hour drive south of Albuquerque. Residents say the community is friendly, and people are hard workers. Most kids are bussed to school from their homes throughout Socorro County, one of the state's largest geographical counties. While the area has several farmers, any food grown is typically shipped elsewhere.

The effort to get local, healthy produce in schools is part of the Healthy Kids Healthy Socorro County Initiative, which is supported by the New Mexico Department of Health. The initiative is making local changes – like increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables – so it's easier for people to eat healthy food and be physically active. Hyden and the other participating farmers are planning to stagger their production of 500 pounds of carrots each so they can supply the school district with food throughout the school year and during summer school.

“This could directly deal with the health issues people can have related to food,” Hyden said. “It could also deal with the economic health of our community. I think it would make our land more valuable and also would make our water more valuable if crops were grown directly for people.”

Getting local produce in the schools has involved partners from the community and other areas of New Mexico. Nadine Ulibarri-Keller, a Department of Health employee who works in health promotion moved back to Socorro 17 years ago. She has led much of the Healthy Kids Healthy Socorro County work. She arranged meetings with Farm to Table, farmers from Northern New Mexico and Los Lunas' and Socorro's food services directors to figure out how local farmers could supply food to the schools.

It was the final piece to improving school food. Ulibarri-Keller had worked with nutrition staff over the years to encourage more fruits and vegetables. Food-services staff implemented salad bars at the high school and middle school as well as Zimmerly Elementary.

“That was so successful that teachers, staff and kids were asking for it again,” she said. “Those programs became institutionalized.”

Then the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) revised its meal requirements to improve nutrition in the schools. Food-services staff began changing its menus to accommodate the changes. Also staff gave fruit and vegetable samples to kids at Parkview Elementary through a USDA grant. It was another success.

Ulibarri-Keller is seeing this work become broader through Hyden's pilot project. “I don't think anything would be successful if you didn't have the partnerships,” she said.



Partnerships have been the key to another successful component of Healthy Kids Socorro County – the bike brigade. Parents, teachers and city staff have volunteered to help children safely bike to school from established meeting sites once a month. Socorro Striders and Riders donated backpacks with patch kits, tire pumps and bike tools, said Cynthia Connolly, who organizes volunteers as part of her job coordinating the initiative.

"I'm glad that Healthy Kids Socorro has been able to work with our partners to help educate families about eating well and exercising," Connolly said. "It makes it easy when you have these partners already doing great things."

Socorro City Councilor Ernest Pargas is president of the local health council called Scope (Socorro County Options Prevention and Education). A native of Socorro, Pargas said he's always been interested in volunteering for health-related causes. Every month he meets kids at his designated pickup point, the First Baptist Church, and bikes together with them to Zimmerly Elementary or the charter school.

"I see so many people out that I've never seen before," Pargas said. "I recall thinking at one event, the town's come alive again. I guess for lots of the community people work really hard, and they work in silos, not together. A lot of that you can see changing. People are working together, rebuilding those relationships. Everybody's taking the best of what they have and just working together."

The kids ride an average of a mile to school with two volunteers, one leading and the other bringing up the rear. Ulibarri-Keller is the floater, riding in her car between groups, handing out bike helmets and pumping flat tires. Ulibarri-Keller noticed that one fourth-grade boy started his own bike brigade on the east side of Socorro. He travels with a handful of friends about a mile to school from the Wagon Wheel Mobile Home Park on 6th Street near the I-25 Interstate.

"I think if we can turn more kids into biking enthusiasts, that's one good goal," she said. "More than that, we want the city to recognize this is a great biking city."

Ulibarri-Keller believes their biking program can be a model for other rural communities that have schools located far from neighborhoods. When she couldn't establish walking programs, she decided to try biking instead since parents enjoyed doing that in Socorro already.



“It became such a wonderful event with almost no effort because kids love to ride their bikes,” Ulibarri-Keller said.



She plans to work with the city of Socorro and an active transportation planner to get bike lanes designated on streets. The proposed plan will likely occur in two phases as existing routes and destinations are expanded and enhanced and wayfinding signage is posted.

Councilor Pargas said he would like to see walking and biking paths as well. The city’s new recreation director has implemented several new programs engaging kids in physical activity through cheerleading, flag football, basketball and tackle football, he said.

“The administration supports that 110 percent,” he said. “It’s fun to see kids healthier – less T.V., more activities.”