

## **Active Rural Health News Service**

### Final Report

October 20, 2007

Mountain Association for Community Economic Development received a \$5,000 grant from the Foundation for Healthy Kentucky to operate the Active Rural Health News Service for the 2006-07 fiscal year. The Service, conceived by the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky, was designed to show weekly and small daily newspapers in rural Kentucky that good health can be good business by creating a news section about health, geared toward general readers and spotlighting features on local people.

### OUTCOME

Three newspapers agreed to produce an insert for one of their weekly editions: The Barbourville Mountain Advocate, the Berea Citizen and the Mt. Vernon Signal. The publishers of each of these publications agreed to the following terms:

1. ARHN would supply professionally written journalistic articles regarding the primary health problems in the newspaper's service area. The News Service agreed that all the articles would be about local people and events and would contain no "canned" copy.
2. ARHN would supply photographs to illustrate the news stories, but that the host newspaper was free to also provide photos or other illustrations.
3. Articles would identify health problems in the community and report local people's efforts to address those problems.
4. ARHN would supply pre-printed, postage paid reply cards to be inserted into the special editions as a way of gauging reader interest in the health news section.
5. Extra copies would be distributed to health care providers, government agencies and others.
6. Publishers would provide information about the profitability of the section.
7. Publishers agreed to place the name "Active Rural Health News" and MACED in a prominent place on the papers. In addition ARHN requested that the phrase "Active Rural Health News Service is supported by the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky" somewhere in the section.

The original concept for these sections called for participating newspapers to send the edition with the section to all households in their county, not just to subscribers. (Papers with second-class postal permits can mail up to 10 percent of their annual poundage to non-subscribers at subscriber rates.) Only one of the four newspapers to which this proposition was made agreed to mail sample copies, and one of the four did not agree to participate in the project.

## RESULTS

Three editions of Active Rural Health News were published.

The first edition was called Southeast Kentucky Health & Wellness and was published in Barbourville and inserted into the Barbourville Mountain Advocate in December 2006. While ARHN anticipated that the papers would print the material on tabloid newsprint, the Mountain Advocate decided to print theirs as a 28-page slick magazine. This section looked more professional and lasted longer when it was placed in waiting areas of pharmacies, doctor and dentist offices. The Barbourville edition contained 15 news stories: 8 of these were submitted or written by the Mountain Advocate staff or were submitted without solicitation from ARHN. Of the remaining 7 articles, 6 were written by Judy Owens and one was written by UK journalism student Bruce Walters. The Mountain Advocate provided staff photographers to shoot photos. Although Mountain Advocate Publisher J.T. Hurst declined to provide exact figures, he informed ARHN that the publication “broke a little more than even” and that it was popular with advertisers.

A total of 19 reply cards inserted into the special section were returned. The following represents the readers’ reaction to the section:

\*19/19 (100%) of responders read ARHN

\*6/19 (32%) subscribe to Mountain Advocate

\*8/13 (62%) of current non-subscribers *would* subscribe if the health section were a regular feature

Those readers who responded indicated that articles about walking, a new Wellness Center at Union College and diabetes were the most liked.

The Berea edition was published March 29, 2007 as a 16-page newsprint tabloid. The Berea edition prominently credited the Foundation as well as MACED and the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues. Of the 12 articles that appeared, six were written by freelance writer Beth Dotson Brown and the remainder by Judy Owens. Berea Citizen Publisher Teresa Scenters indicated that the special edition more than broke even with its advertising sales. Scenters was the only publisher who agreed to send sample copies of the paper, with the health section included, to non-subscribers. Sample copies were limited to the Berea ZIP code in southern Madison County. Twenty non-subscribers returned reply cards, with the following responses:

\*17/20 (85%) of responders read ARHN

\*2/20 (10%) subscribe to the Berea Citizen

\*7/18 (39%) of current non-subscribers *would* subscribe if H&W a regular feature

[Only 7/18 (39%) actually opposed: 2 “maybe,” one “?” and one blank response]

[One *current* BC subscriber would *not* subscribe if H&W included]

The most popular articles were on walking and diabetes.

The Mt. Vernon Signal's special health edition appeared as a newsprint tabloid insert on September 27, 2007. Mt. Vernon's section contained 12 pages featuring 12 articles. Of the 13 articles, two were written by MACED summer interns, one by Judy Owens and the remaining 9 by freelance writer Beth Dotson Brown.

Seven reply cards were returned, with the following responses:

\*7/7 (100%) of responders read ARHN

\*4/7 (57% of responders subscribe to the Mt. Vernon Signal

\*6/7 (80%) of responders would subscribe if the health section were a regular feature.

Diabetes and smoking were the most liked articles with three responses each. Once again, the publishers indicated that advertising sales more than covered the cost of publication.

Overall, Active Rural Health News succeeded in:

\* Providing locally written news stories demonstrating the community's most serious health issues and showing how local people were addressing those issues.

\* Demonstrating that weekly newspaper readers enjoy reading health news. A remarkable 100 percent of readers surveyed for all papers reported reading the section.

\* Showing that in a group of subscribers and non-subscribers, ARHN was attractive enough to encourage subscription. The only paper that mailed sample copies, Berea, showed that 39 percent of the non-subscribers would subscribe if a health section were a regular feature.

\* Confirming that health news with a direct impact on local health issues are interesting to general audience readers. Respondents indicated that they were especially interested in reading about diabetes and smoking – coincidentally two of the most prevalent and preventable conditions in rural Kentucky.

The Active Rural Health News encountered the following issues or problems:

\* Weekly newspaper publishers were unfamiliar with working with non-profit organizations and participation in the project required some coaxing. Once they agreed to participate, communication was sometimes spotty. In the end, however, each publisher indicated that he or she was pleased with the outcome and would participate again if the opportunity were available.

\* Funding required for the project was grossly underestimated, and was approximately \$7,100 more than the \$5,000 provided by the Foundation for Healthy Kentucky. This overrun was absorbed by MACED, which initially agreed only to serve as a fiscal agent for the project. The costs were higher than expected because only one student was available for free or low-cost freelance work.

\* The project proposal assumed that once an initial group of articles were written, the existing articles would serve as a template and subsequent articles could be written more efficiently. This did not occur. Each article had to be researched and reported separately, because data on health status was not as readily accessible as we expected and

there was little if any time savings accrued by repeating the articles on the same topic from one community to the next.

\* Two of the three papers that agreed to participate in the project declined to mail sample copies to non-subscribers. We found publishers to be wary of this idea because it was a direct cost to them without any assurance of return on investment. However, the survey results received by the one paper that did sample-copy indicate that health coverage can be a circulation builder for small, rural newspapers. We believe that this experience will encourage other papers to follow suit, and that they will be successful if they use sample copying as a tool to sell more advertising for the section or the regular section(s) of the paper. Another alternative is to sell “sponsored circulation” to an advertiser or other organization that wants to reach all households in the county and can pay all or part of the extra mailing cost.

\* It was difficult to sustain communication between the host newspapers and the ARHN, so there was little if any editorial guidance from the Institute. Design work was not performed by the Institute, but instead by the newspapers’ own production staff. The Institute has only one full-time staff member and has many ongoing projects, so additional staff expenses would probably be required for detailed editorial guidance. The Institute will perform a critique of the three sections that have been produced, to help guide production of future sections.

## CONCLUSION

Active Rural Health News succeeded in demonstrating that it was profitable for weekly newspapers to produce special sections filled with articles about how local people were addressing health care needs in their communities. The project showed that weekly newspaper readers enjoyed the articles, read them and were more likely to subscribe to the paper if such a section is included. Weekly newspaper publishers had a unique opportunity to become involved in a partnership with a non-profit and all expressed enthusiasm for the experience. The project was underbid partly because of the assumption that the articles would be formulaic after the first edition, because data on health status was not as readily available as originally thought and because students were not reliable or available to help produce articles. Given adequate resources and coordination, however, Active Rural Health News appears to be able to deliver important health information through weekly newspapers, and such news appears to be good business for the papers. The Institute should pursue the idea with other rural papers, perhaps focusing on newspaper chains that can provide coordination, marketing strategy and economies of scale to make the sections profitable and cost-efficient.

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