



Bader Villa

Cottonwood Estates

Dark Island Walking Trail Association

# Case Study

## Community partnerships engage residents in healthy living

### Abstract

Faced with a higher-than-average obesity rate in its local community, Merrick Medical Center in Central City, Neb., set out to change the way residents engage in health and fitness activities. What began as a social media campaign encouraging people to share photos of their healthy activities quickly transformed into a vision to influence the overall health of the community.

The hospital carried the momentum of the social media campaign forward, forming multiple community-based partnerships focused on wellness. These include fitness and nutrition programs at area schools and senior living communities, as well as a partnership with a local nonprofit walking trail association. Leaders at Merrick Medical Center report that participation in these programs has been much higher than originally anticipated, putting them well on track to achieve the objective of improving health throughout the Merrick County community.

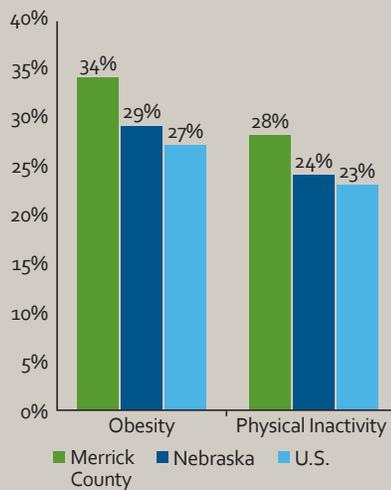
### Opportunity

A 2016 Community Health Needs Assessment for Merrick County, Neb., revealed some troubling statistics. Twenty-eight percent of the county's residents were physically inactive, compared to a state average of 24 percent and a national average of 23 percent. In addition, 34 percent of its residents were obese, also higher than state (29 percent) and national (27 percent) averages.

These findings served as the catalyst for change in the way Merrick Medical Center approached preventive care, shifting the focus to programs and partnerships that promote exercise and healthy food choices. The hospital began a quarterly social media campaign that encourages residents and staff to post photos of themselves being physically active and use the hashtag #HappyExercisingMC. Participants are entered into drawings for prizes like free fitness memberships and wearable fitness trackers.

Inspired by what the hospital CEO calls the community's "overwhelmingly positive response" to the wellness promotion, leaders and staff at Merrick Medical Center developed several community partnerships to further improve fitness and provide nutrition education.

Health in Merrick County,  
By the Numbers



300%

Increase in likes on Merrick Medical Center Facebook page after launch of the #HappyExercisingMC social media campaign

13 pounds

Average weight loss of participants in the ShapeMyHealth diabetes prevention program

Source: Merrick Medical Center

## Partnership Approach

With the goal of combining health care and life care in ways that make healthy living easier to achieve, Merrick Medical Center has created partnerships with local businesses, schools and other organizations in the community. These partnerships and programs include:

### Health, Safety and Nutritional Education in Local Schools

- **Athletic Trainer:** The hospital provides Central City High School with a full-time certified athletic trainer who is present for all home sporting events. The trainer also provides education to students throughout the year related to healthy workout habits and nutrition for athletes.
- **Concussion Management and Sports Injuries Coaches Clinics:** Before each school year begins, a physician from the hospital hosts a clinic to educate school coaching staff on appropriate concussion management protocols and provide information on keeping student athletes at peak performance.
- **Elementary Nutrition and Fitness Program:** A registered dietician and physician assistants from the hospital visit K-5 physical education classes to teach students about healthy food choices. The program ends with a jump rope contest (which includes free jump ropes for students to keep and use at home).

### Healthy Activities in Senior Living Communities

- **Tai Chi Classes:** Hospital staff members who are certified Tai Chi instructors provide Tai Chi exercise classes twice a week at Cottonwood Estates Assisted Living Community and Bader Senior Living Apartments in Central City.
- **Central City Mall Grocery Store Tours:** A registered dietician from the hospital offers tours to area seniors explaining how the grocery store is laid out, where to find the healthiest food choices, how to read nutrition labels, and how best to make a shopping list.

### Fitness Events on the Local Trail

- **Summer Tuesdays Taco Ride:** The hospital partners with the Dark Island Walking Trail Association to host 13-mile roundtrip bicycle rides to Marquette, Neb., where they reward themselves with a local restaurant's Taco Tuesday special.
- **Half-Marathon:** The hospital and the Dark Island Walking Trail Association sponsor the event, which draws nearly 100 participants from across Nebraska and as far away as Oklahoma and Virginia. Plans are underway for the organizations to partner on a full marathon in 2018.

### Health Screenings and Education in Area Businesses

- **Occupational Wellness Program:** For a minimal fee per employee, the hospital provides businesses with on-site health screenings and "lunch and learn" educational opportunities with a registered nurse. Businesses also receive toolkits outlining employee fitness and nutrition challenges to use throughout the year. All participating businesses are invited to participate in a "Business Olympics" event held during the community's annual Fourth of July celebration.

---

“Merrick Medical Center and its partners have created programs that combine health care and life care so that healthy living is easier to achieve for everyone in our community.”

– Julie Murray, CEO, Merrick Medical Center

---

## Results

Merrick Medical Center reported excellent community participation in the partnership programs. The #HappyExercisingMC social media campaign not only raised physical activity levels, but it also increased the number of likes on the hospital’s Facebook page by 300 percent. The organization continues to use the hashtag with quarterly campaigns and prize drawings for residents as well as hospital staff.

With the successes realized so far, momentum continues to mount for expanded health and fitness initiatives. In addition to the community partnerships, three certified lifestyle coaches from Merrick Medical Center started a diabetes prevention program based on curriculum from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Shape My Health program launched in February 2017, and helped 22 participants who lost an average of 13 pounds each in its first five months. The cost of the yearlong program is \$100.

The hospital is also making plans to expand its grocery store tour program to include young families by partnering with area daycare centers.

## Lessons Learned

**Engagement:** Merrick Medical Center leaders initially anticipated that it would be a challenge to engage residents in becoming more fitness-minded. On the contrary, they say, residents were eager to participate, and the response far exceeded expectations.

## Community Partners

Merrick Medical Center (formerly Litzenberg Memorial County Hospital) is a 20-bed critical access hospital located in Central City, Neb., with physician clinic services in Central City and nearby Fullerton. Part of Bryan Health, Merrick Medical Center offers inpatient and outpatient hospital services, as well as physician clinic services to care for you and your family.

Central City Public Schools educate, challenge, and prepare K-12 students with lifelong skills for the world around them.

Bader Villa senior living apartments are located in Central City, Neb.

Cottonwood Estates is an assisted living community in Central City, Neb., that is dedicated to providing exceptional and compassionate care.

Dark Island Walking Trail Association is a nonprofit organization supporting the Dark Island Trail, an 8-mile recreational trail converted from an abandoned railroad corridor.

## About Bryan Health

Bryan Health is a Nebraska-governed, nonprofit health system that cares for patients, educates tomorrow’s health care providers, motivates our community with fitness and health programs, and collaborates to continually improve how we serve others.

---

## Contacts

**Carol A. Friesen, MPH, FHFMA**  
*VP Health System Services*  
Bryan Health

**Julie Murray**  
*Chief Executive Officer*  
Merrick Medical Center