

**Adolescent Health Project Focus Groups**  
**Final Report**  
**December 2019**

DCCCA completed 19 focus groups with 180 students in middle schools, high schools, and colleges around the state of Kansas. Participants included youth from the following communities –

- **Northeast**
  - Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation Boys and Girls Club – High School Youth
  - Haskell University
  - Baker University
  - Total Equality Alliance at Lawrence High School
  - Kansas Youth Empowerment Academy – High School and College Youth
  - Holton High School
- **Southwest**
  - Dodge City High School
  - Ness City Junior High School
- **Southeast**
  - DCCCA Elm Acres Recovery Services – High School Youth
  - Juvenile Services District 5 (Lyon County) – Middle and High School Youth
  - Yates Center High School (Two groups)
- **Northwest**
  - Northwest Kansas Juvenile Services – Middle and High School Youth
  - Wallace County High School
  - Stockton High School
- **North Central**
  - Smith Center High School
  - Clay Center High School
- **South Central**
  - Butler Community College
  - Wellington High School

The focus group format consisted of a variety of questions related to adolescent health and wellness needs, barriers, and priorities. Schools and community organizations were asked to select a variety of students from different backgrounds and social groups to ensure that multiple perspectives were heard. Each focus group lasted 45-60 minutes. At the beginning of each focus group, whole health was defined for the participants to lay the foundation for the discussion.

Less than five of the youth surveyed were slightly over 21, but those participants' responses did not vary significantly from the feedback received overall.

The list of questions presented to the students included-

- Keeping in mind what we said about “health” earlier, can you tell us what being healthy means to you?
- What kinds of things can you or your friends do (actions and decisions) that are healthy/good for you?
- What kinds of things do you or your friends do (actions and decisions) that are unhealthy/not good for you?

- Out of all of those things, what do you think is the thing you or your friends care about most that keeps you healthy? Unhealthy?
- Where do you or your friends go if they are sick or have questions about how to stay healthy?
- What foods do you or your friends think are healthy to eat? Where can you go to get healthy food?
- Where do you or your friends go to exercise, work out or just be physically active?
- Where do you or your friends go if they need someone to talk to?
- Do you or your friends have someplace to go in your community where you feel comfortable talking about your health and how you are feeling?
- What kinds of things make it hard for you or your friends to get help with your health and wellness needs?
- How well do you think you or your friends could explain their health needs to others?
- What do you do to take care of your health and health care needs?
- If you need help with meeting your health needs, who helps you? Are you comfortable with their help?
- Is there any place where you or your friends can learn about how to be healthy and how to take care of your health care needs?
- What kinds of things do you think you or your friends would need to know in order to take care of your health and health care needs?
- Is there anything about your health or health care that we haven't discussed that you'd like to share?

### **Question 1 – What healthy means**

The most common response from youth was that being healthy means having a good balance, both in every aspect of life and in mental and physical health. This did not vary between locations or ages. Eating healthy and exercising was frequently mentioned as well as refraining from substance use. Youth reported that taking time for self-care, being happy and having a positive mindset, making smart decisions, and trying to be the best version of oneself are all components of what health means to them.

### **Question 2 – Healthy actions and decisions**

Youth reported many options for healthy actions they can take in their lives. Responses frequently focused on physical health and included actions such as eating healthy, drinking water, having good hygiene, exercising or working out, going on walks with friends, and participating in school sports. High school participants in particular focused on physical activity as a healthy action they can take.

Youth overwhelmingly reported that social connections were very important to health, including surrounding oneself with positive people and avoiding negative behaviors and toxic relationships. Relationships with peers and hanging out with friends were often reported as healthy decisions. Youth indicated that talking to friends about problems helped them and that it was also important to look out for friends and help others who might be struggling.

Three areas high school and college youth indicated were healthy choices they struggled to make were time management, sufficient sleep, and stress management. Youth reported that decision making was an important component of health but indicated that at times they do not always make positive decisions related to time management and sleep, which contributes to stress. Youth across the board reported that hobbies such as writing songs, creating art, playing video games, and participating in extracurricular activities were very important actions they can take to stay healthy.

Though refraining from substance use was sometimes mentioned, it was not a primary or initial response from the majority of participants. College youth and justice-involved youth were more likely to offer this action as a way to stay healthy than middle school or high school youth. With the exception of vaping/juuling, substance use was not mentioned frequently.

There was mixed reaction from youth regarding technology and screen time. Some groups indicated that limiting screen time was a healthy choice, others shared that phones and video games were healthy outlets in their lives.

### **Question 3 – Unhealthy actions and decisions**

Youth overwhelmingly reported that poor food choices including eating out, consuming junk food or fast food, and binge eating was an unhealthy decision that they frequently made. Youth often made the connection between eating unhealthy food and not being physically active or sitting around all day as another unhealthy behavior.

Procrastination, poor time management, and stress from school and life were commonalities across every age and location. Sleeping too much or too little was a common unhealthy behavior that high school and college youth engaged in due to stress, homework, or entertainment like video games or tv. Concerns over unhealthy screen time either through phone usage, gaming, social media, or streaming services were brought up often among youth.

Youth shared that engaging in toxic friendships and relationships is unhealthy behavior, including peers

who bully and/or gossip about others. High school and college youth mentioned that caring about what other people think and comparing oneself to others is an unhealthy behavior. Youth also reported that arguing and physically fighting are unhealthy behaviors, though this was mentioned less frequently than other behaviors.

Another unhealthy action or decision reported by youth was keeping personal issues they are struggling with to themselves or isolating themselves. Fear of judgement, concern over confidentiality, or lacking the ability to express their emotions were three reasons often cited for this behavior.

Partying and substance use such as drinking alcohol, doing drugs, vaping or smoking, and smoking marijuana were also indicated as unhealthy behaviors. Drinking alcohol and/or drinking and driving was mentioned frequently by college youth and rural youth; vaping was mentioned among all ages and groups; drugs and smoking marijuana was mentioned most often by justice-involved youth and college youth.

#### **Question 4 – Most important healthy/unhealthy actions and decisions**

Of all the potential healthy actions and decisions mentioned, youth overwhelmingly emphasized physical activity such as working out or playing sports as the thing they and their friends cared the most about. Additionally, they indicated that connections with others such as talking to friends about problems, being a positive influence, and staying away from toxic people were significant to them. Eating healthy and drinking plenty of water was also recognized by many youth as a healthy decision. Self-care and doing things to regenerate was mentioned by some youth as a priority. Screen time and video games were indicated by a few youth as a healthy action, but they were not mentioned as frequently as the other decisions and actions above.

Unhealthy eating such as eating out or eating fast food/junk food was the thing youth and their friends indicated they care the most about. They shared that it is cheaper, quicker, and more available than healthy food options. They also stated that it is a way to socialize with others and in smaller communities, is sometimes the only social activity available. Eating too much, skipping meals, and consuming too much caffeine were also mentioned as behaviors they engaged in related to unhealthy eating.

High school and college youth also mentioned staying up too late and/or procrastination as another unhealthy decision made frequently amongst their peers. Due to busy schedules, homework, and extracurricular activities it can be hard to find time to practice self-care or get proper sleep. Youth shared that lack of time management and procrastination contributes to increased stress and lack of sleep sometimes. Screen time either through phone usage, gaming, social media, or streaming services was mentioned fairly frequently as an unhealthy action or decision made by youth. Another unhealthy behavior shared by youth was being too hard on oneself and caring about what others think.

Substance use such as smoking, vaping, drinking alcohol, and doing drugs was also mentioned somewhat frequently by high school and college youth, particularly justice-involved youth.

#### **Question 5 – Where to go when sick or have health questions**

Overall, youth had a fairly strong awareness of health resources such as hospitals and clinics that were and were not available in their community. They had slightly less information about mental health resources available and if they were aware of those resources, many indicated that they did not personally utilize them for various reasons including stigma and cost.

Google, WebMD, or other online resources were frequently mentioned as places youth across all ages and regions go when they are sick or have questions about how to stay healthy. Youth indicated that when they are sick, they frequently self-diagnose and deal with it on their own or with their parent/guardian's help either with bedrest, over the counter medicines, or both.

Most youth responded with individual practitioners that they see as opposed to businesses or organizations. Friends, parents or other family members, therapists, teachers, professors, counselors, coaches, teammates, doctors, nurses or a trusted adult were mentioned as individuals to whom youth might go.

One group indicated that they would first visit with their family if they are sick or have questions about how to stay healthy. The same group indicated that they feel their counselors are available for any issue they may face, and they feel comfortable going to them.

Youth reported urgent care facilities, community clinics, mental health centers, doctor's offices, churches, and hospitals as locations they could go to if they are sick or have questions about how to stay healthy.

One group of youth shared that when their friends struggle with mental health issues, they seek support from each other, and they try their best to help. They expressed uncertainty with providing that support for their friends because sometimes they do not have the answers they are looking for and it can take a toll on the supporter.

All three college groups indicated that college health centers were a resource they could utilize.

#### **Question 6 – Healthy foods and where to get them**

Many high school and college youth indicated fast food options purchased from a restaurant were healthy food options including Subway, the Pizza Hut salad bar, Jimmy John's, McDonald's, Tropical Café, Qdoba, and Osaki. Some youth also shared that items purchased at a grocery store or convenience store such as chips, tacos, jerky, pizza rolls, hot pockets, burritos, pizza, and bagels were considered healthy food options. While this may be contrary to what some individuals believe, there is a perception among some youth that these items are healthy.

Water, fruits and vegetables, whole grains, healthy fats, protein, dairy, and leafy greens were often mentioned across all ages and locations. The plate diagram or the food pyramid was referenced occasionally, but this was not consistent across all groups. Some youth indicated a stronger awareness of the components of healthy food and discussed elements such as caloric or portion balance, foods made at home versus foods at a restaurant, foods that are not processed, and foods that are rich in the right nutrients. Others did not express a strong awareness of food as a resource for health.

Most youth reported that they had access to healthy foods through a local or regional grocery store such as Dillon's, a franchise store with produce such as Walmart or Target, or in the school cafeteria. Farmer's markets, gardens, churches, and Dollar Generals were also mentioned, but not as frequently.

Many youth from rural communities indicated that healthy food was more difficult or even impossible to get because families have to travel to another community to access these foods. Several high school and college groups reported that some options offered by the school cafeteria are not healthy.

### **Question 7 – Where to get physical activity**

Youth across all ages and locations reported both an awareness and utilization of an abundance of resources for physical activity. Resources were dependent upon the community but included community centers or recreation centers, fitness centers, parks, backyards, community gyms, YMCAs, outdoor trails, community basketball courts, sports practice, school weight rooms, the pool, school gyms, dog parks, their own homes, skate parks, or the outdoors.

Two of the three college groups indicated that athletics were celebrated on campus and that youth bond over physical activity. One college group shared that dancing at a dance club is a way to get exercise. Middle school and high school youth overwhelmingly reported that physical activity plays a very important role in their schools, communities, and their own lives.

Many rural participants indicated that the quality or availability of the resources were not as plentiful, and one group expressed concern over the future of those resources as their communities age.

Many youth shared that community gyms or fitness centers can be too expensive.

### **Question 8 – Where to go for someone to talk to**

Most youth across all ages and locations reported that they first approach their friends and peers when they need someone to talk to, either in person or virtually through texting and social media. Specific social media platforms that were mentioned included Snapchat, which was mentioned most often, and Instagram. Parents were the second most mentioned group that youth would go to when they need someone to talk to. However, many youth indicated that it can be awkward or embarrassing to go to adults. Youth feel that adults do not understand what they are going through and they fear judgment. They also indicated that they feel adults are too busy and they do not take the time to listen to their concerns.

High school and college youth frequently reported keeping the things they deal with to themselves or utilizing the internet to cope with issues due to lack of trust in others.

Youth indicated that parents, foster parents, family members, teachers, and coaches play a particularly important role in their lives and they expressed that these are the adults they would go to if they needed someone to talk to. Some youth indicated that they already reach out to these adults and others indicated that they would need to build trust with them before they feel like they could reach out.

A few groups did report that they felt like their school counselor or social worker was a positive support, but the majority of high school and college youth reported that they would not visit with their school counselor or social worker if they needed someone to talk to. There is a perception that these individuals are not trained to deal with personal issues, do not have the time to support youth, or cannot be trusted to keep information shared confidential.

Mental Health Centers were mentioned somewhat frequently as a resource for support in the community, though most youth, particularly those in rural communities, reported that they would not feel comfortable visiting a mental health clinic due to confidentiality concerns and stigma.

### **Question 9 – Where in the community can you talk about health/how you're feeling**

Most often, youth across all ages and locations referenced hang out spots with their friends such as the

cafeteria, driving around, or the lake in their community as the place they go to talk about health or how they are feeling.

Youth reported that they are sometimes able to approach certain teachers, coaches, or parents to discuss how they are feeling, but some youth mentioned that it can be uncomfortable. Many youth expressed distrust and discomfort at approaching the school counselor to meet these needs.

Community resources such as youth group, therapy, doctors, clinics, hospitals, health departments, student success centers, and other organizations were cited as places to go for support, though not as frequently or consistently as they mentioned support from their peers.

#### **Question 10 – Barriers to meeting health and wellness needs**

Stigma was frequently mentioned as a barrier to getting health and wellness needs met. One group indicated that the environment a person grows up in can dictate how or even if they access services to get the help they need at all. Another group reported that being surrounded by others with unhealthy habits can prevent them from taking steps to have healthy habits as well. Pride, denial, shyness, and lack of motivation were also mentioned as feelings that keep youth from meeting their health needs. Youth across all ages and locations expressed a lack of trust in others as a barrier to getting their needs met, whether it be mistrust of professionals or the fear of judgment from those around them, particularly as it pertains to mental health needs.

Lack of resources was also frequently mentioned as a barrier to getting health and wellness needs met. Time was the most frequent resource youth expressed they did not have enough of; due to school, homework, and extracurricular commitments it can be tough for them to find the time to focus on their health and wellness. High school and college youth frequently mentioned the cost of services and navigating that cost as a roadblock to getting services. Transportation and lack of services were also two barriers, particularly for rural communities. Having to travel many miles to receive services because they are not available in their community can be difficult and expensive for families.

Some youth indicated a lack of awareness regarding what resources were available in their community, particularly around mental health. College youth seemed to be the most informed as to what was available to them, particularly on campus.

#### **Question 11 – Comfort level in explaining your health needs**

Youth across all ages and locations expressed a clear distinction between explaining physical health needs and mental health needs. Youth indicated that it feels comfortable to approach an adult, be it a parent, teacher, or doctor about a physical issue. Youth overwhelmingly reported that they were far less comfortable explaining mental health needs to adults. They indicated that they feel adults do not necessarily understand their mental health issues or take them seriously. Youth also shared that it is difficult to discuss mental health issues because it can be vulnerable, making it hard to trust other people. Youth reported a strong fear of judgment from others. They expressed that it can be tough to find the right language to talk about mental health needs. One group in a rural community indicated that because it is a farming community, boys are told to have a beer and girls are told to calm down instead. Youth also reported that they did not want to feel like a burden by expressing their needs to others.

One group shared that they need a role model to follow in regard to talking about emotions to make it more normalized. Another group indicated that it is important that they are asked the right questions to

be able to explain their health needs, particularly as it pertains to mental health. They did not provide specific examples of what those questions would be.

College youth indicated that applied health science majors are more equipped than other students to talk about health and it can be a struggle with health terminology to voice concerns. They expressed that because parents used to help, it can be more difficult now to do this themselves.

Youth reported confusion around accessing mental health services and parental involvement in that process and expressed the desire for confidentiality.

Youth across all ages and locations reported being very comfortable explaining their physical health needs with friends and some groups reported being comfortable explaining their mental health needs with friends.

### **Question 12 – Taking care of your health needs**

Youth demonstrated a wide range of things they do to take care of their health needs. Connection with others was the most frequently mentioned way that youth take care of their health needs. Some youth mentioned their relationship with their parents and family to demonstrate their point, while others reported hanging out with their friends and being around positive people were ways they take care of their health needs.

Various hobbies were also mentioned as a way to take care of needs. Students most often reported that participating in sports either through school or on their own informally is a way they take care of themselves. Watching movies, reading, listening to music, and going for walks were also frequently mentioned.

Youth reported that self-care is another way they take care of their health needs. They practice self-care through several different activities like relaxation, having fun, joking around, eliminating stressors, meditation, and self-reflection.

Many youth indicated that eating healthy, taking vitamins, drinking water, getting plenty of sleep and exercise, and going for regular check-ups were ways they take care of their overall health.

Youth also reported that sticking to a routine schedule, going to school and/or work consistently, and practicing good time management are things they do or can do to take care of their needs.

Another answer provided by one group of youth was utilizing prayer to help take care of their health needs.

### **Question 13 – Who helps meet your health needs**

Youth most widely reported that their friends or parents are who helps them meet their health needs. Several groups also referenced Google and WebMD as a resource they utilize. Many also indicated that other family members, friends' parents, coaches, and teachers also support them in meeting their needs. Therapists, school counselors, and doctors were also mentioned but not as frequently.

Youth indicated that it can be difficult to decide when to go to the doctor and when to stick it out. They shared that it is easier to help someone else than to help meet their own needs. One group mentioned that it can be difficult to get needs met if there is a lack of family stability.

### **Question 14 – Where can you learn about how to be healthy**

School was the main resource for many youth to learn about how to be healthy, but the resources varied greatly depending upon location. Resources included campus organizations, college health forums, nutritionists, school speakers, wellness meetings, coaches, and middle school or high school health class. There was a mixed opinion on whether school health classes are a good resource, many youth felt as though it lacked useful information particularly around mental health. The internet, including YouTube, was another main resource mentioned across ages and locations. Asking family members or visiting gyms, libraries, and hospitals were also mentioned as resources, though not as frequently as school and internet resources.

### **Question 15 – What do you need to take care of health needs**

Youth across all ages and locations had an abundance of ideas for what they need to take care of their health needs.

#### **Physical and Food Health**

- How to eat well and cooking tips
- More transparency from adults about information related to health
- Communication from adults about health
- How much exercise to get each day
- More comprehensive sex education

#### **Area Resources**

- Places for teens to go/positive activities (bowling alley, movie theatre, teen center, etc.)
- Easier access to services and how to find out about them
- Basic information about what's available nearby and how to access
- Convenient places to access care such as a school-based health center or places that are close by and easy to get to
- More local counseling services

#### **Health Insurance**

- Health insurance: how to get it, how to use it
- Cost of care, what is covered by insurance
- Personal health plans, not one size fits all
- Insurance coverage for those who don't have it

#### **Communication**

- How to talk about what you need
- Learning the skills to talk to a doctor - what to do and say to care providers
- What to do at the doctor's office
- Role models for how to talk about emotions

#### **School**

- More health sessions in school
- School-based health care
- Mental health days from school
- Rooms or spaces in school that students can visit when they need to calm down, relax, or de-

stress

### **Habits & Personal Growth**

- Information about how to form healthy habits and break unhealthy habits
- How to manage time
- How to know when you should go to the doctor physically or mentally

### **Mental and Emotional Health**

- How to deal with your own emotional problems
- Coping skills
- Breathing and meditation skills
- Yoga, meditation
- Understanding self-care
- Understanding triggers
- Who can help you if you aren't feeling happy?
- Ways to stay mentally healthy
- Support for depression

### **Support**

- More understanding and approachable adults
  - Make time to have conversations with youth
  - Listen first
  - Build trust by taking an interest in what is going on in youths' lives
  - Take the issues youth approach adults with seriously
- Support from adults and parents
- How to transition to college

### **Question 16 – Suggestions**

- Raise awareness about and normalize getting help with health needs, specifically mental health
- Make services more welcoming and positive
- Send out information about health and health resources often to youth-serving organizations such as school systems
- Provide classes about transitioning to adulthood
- Need to know about health insurance
- Rooms or spaces in schools where students can calm down
- Therapy dogs in schools
- More available and approachable counselors
- Treat youth like adults
- Keep youth issues confidential
- Need to know parents are available and have time to listen
- Need counselors to be more comfortable discussing certain topics
- Have open discussions in class and not forced conversations
- Need to know how to deal with certain emotions like depression, anger
- Free health insurance
- Offer more sweat lodges in communities with native populations
- Offer resources for smudging rituals in communities with native populations

- Start the discussion about healthy habits at a younger age
- More and better school food
- Share flyers that contain resources as well as making people available to talk to about the resources
- Improve food assistance programs
- Rework insurance to pay more for preventive measures, particularly in the population of youth with special health care needs
- Protect the environment
- Make therapy easier to access
- Make gender therapy easier to access
- Be more transparent with youth when making decisions on their behalf or in support of them – explain the “why” behind the “what”
- How not to fall victim to peer pressure
- Resources for youth on how to control attitude, body language, and how to better communicate with others
- More comprehensive sex education
- Youth want to be respected by teachers and other adults
- Make sure youth know what resources are available
- How do we trust health care as a whole?
- More access to mental health providers
- In-school therapist
- Health resources for transgender and LGBTQ+ youth
- Mental health days from school
- Low-income health resources – affordable health care
- More patience and understanding from adults when it comes to the stress teenagers face with school and life

### **Special Considerations**

Eight of the focus groups contained youth from special populations: youth from tribal communities(2), youth from Spanish-speaking or marginalized households(1), youth who identify as LGBTQ+ or allies(1), youth with special health care needs(1), youth who are justice-involved(2), and youth who are substance-involved(1). They offered perspectives specific to their experiences and communities.

**Tribal Communities** - Youth from tribal communities indicated that religious ceremonies and community gatherings were healthy events they can participate in. During these ceremonies, they eat traditional foods, practice songs, and participate in drum circles. They also indicated that food one can get from the earth is what is most healthy and that food that has prayer put into it contributes to its healthiness. They reported that Indian Health Services is a health and wellness resource for their community, but one group indicated confusion around navigating healthcare and understanding tribal clinic costs. Another group addressed specific challenges with utilizing Medicaid insurance across state lines. College youth reported the desire to have access to a sweat lodge and resources for smudging rituals in the community where they are attending school.

**Youth with Special Health Care Needs** - Youth with special needs shared that a unique challenge they face is that some youth in their community do not have the ability to be physically active, which can also impact their mental health. They indicated they could go to the leadership group they are involved in for support around their health and wellness needs and that their support staff are crucial in meeting their

health needs. Youth expressed that transportation, not knowing what resources are available, and fear of reaching out to people they are unfamiliar with are barriers to taking care of health and wellness needs. The group was unaware of a place in the community where they would feel comfortable talking about their health and how they are feeling. The youth reported that they would like the food assistance programs that are available to include more options specific to dietary restrictions. They also expressed frustration with insurance limiting preventative care such as paying for a wheel chair and joy stick but not the mount and shared a desire for insurance to pay more for preventive measures or doctor visits.

**Youth Who Are LGBTQ+ Or Allies** – Youth reported that a healthy action and decision they make is to participate in their LGBTQ+ organization at school. They reported distrust for school social workers due to untrustworthiness and judgment and expressed the desire for confidentiality and stronger listening skills from adults at school. Judgement from others and labels were two barriers to getting help with health and wellness that were mentioned. They reported the need for gender therapy, a better interview/evaluation for consideration of gender therapy, and more transparency from adults related to decisions that impact youth.

**Justice-Involved Youth** – Youth indicated that staying clean from drugs is one element of what being healthy means to them and that drugs are one of the unhealthy things they care the most about. They shared that AA meetings are place they go to if they are sick, have questions about how to stay healthy, or to talk about their health or how they are feeling. Early curfew that prevents time to hang out with friends and de-stress, denial and lack of trust are barriers to getting help with health and wellness needs. They reported that they smoke and drink as a way to take care of their mental health needs. They indicated that probation officers and therapists help meet their needs. Youth expressed a desire for learning healthy coping skills and how to deal with certain emotions as well as safe, fun, teen-specific places to go in their free time. They also reported the need for free health insurance so that more people can get help. They expressed feeling judgment towards youth who are involved in actions that are viewed as unfavorable and that they need a support system with someone who cares for them. They recommended programs in school to have more information related to health and wellness.

**Youth from Spanish Speaking or Marginalized Households** - Youth shared that their parents have a hard time dealing with the expression of mental health issues due to their culture. They reported that their parents' attitude is that their children do not have anything to be sad about because they had a different life and have lived in war zones. As a result, they downplay sadness and issues and make their children feel guilty for expressing mental health issues. They stated that they feel guilty asking parents for help particularly when there is a cost involved. They expressed the need for parents to communicate that they are available and have time to listen. Youth reported that they overwork themselves through school and jobs to cope. They indicated a sense of discomfort from counselors and teachers when discussing certain topics and they would like to be able to turn to those individuals for support. They recommended a room in the school where students could go to calm down, more open conversations amongst teachers and peers, therapy dogs, more available counselors, school-based health care, and someone who can be there to listen to them.

**Youth Who Are Substance-Involved** - Youth indicated that staying sober is one element of what being healthy means to them, and that drugs, alcohol, and criminal activity are three unhealthy actions they care about. They indicated that there are a lot of 18-and-over businesses in their community including vape shops and CBD shops. They indicated a desire for safe, fun, teen-specific places to go in their free time. They reported that they feel comfortable going to their caseworker to talk about their health and how they are feeling. Youth expressed a lack of good mental health resources in their community and a

lack of trust in those resources. They reported that they distract themselves from doing drugs through other hobbies as a way of taking care of their health and health care needs. They expressed the desire to learn more about self-care.

### **Survey Results**

A survey containing the same questions related to health and wellness was shared with approximately 1,000 youth. 34 youth completed the survey, though it is worth noting that not all 34 youth answered every question. Overall, the survey results did not vary significantly from the perspectives provided by the focus groups. One variation indicated by participants in the survey was that they rely on their family and parents/guardians most frequently to guide them with their health and wellness needs, whereas the focus groups most often indicated that their friends are their initial support. It is worth noting that the pre-developed answers provided in the survey could have limited participants on how they considered their responses to the questions. The conversational nature of the focus groups created an atmosphere where youth were able to provide their unique perspective, while pre-determined answer options could have tethered survey respondents to specific ways of thinking about the question.

### **What Healthy Means**

The individuals answers from the survey did not vary greatly from the perspectives captured in the focus groups. Participants most often indicated that mental and physical fitness, making good choices, and maintaining a balance in life were components of what being healthy means to them.

### **Healthy Actions and Decisions**

Survey participants were able to check all answers that applied to them.

- Exercise – 100%
- Eat Healthy – 93%
- Get Plenty of Sleep – 93%
- Take Time to De-Stress – 86%
- Spend Time with Friends – 83%
- Go to The Doctor – 79%
- Other – 14%
  - Personal hygiene
  - Not sitting on your butt all day
  - Go on runs
  - Do activities that you enjoy

### **Unhealthy Actions and Decisions**

Survey participants were able to check all answers that applied to them.

- Eat Unhealthy/Eat Fast Food – 90%
- Not Get Enough Sleep/Stay Up Too Late – 83%
- Spend Too Much Time on Phone or Using Electronics – 79%
- Let Stress Build Up – 69%
- Use Substances – 34%
- Other – 14%
  - Be lazy all day not doing anything
  - Focusing on the negative or surrounding yourself by bad people/drama
  - Putting things off
  - Put yourself around the wrong crowd

### **Most Important Healthy Action/Decision**

Participants' responses did not vary significantly from the perspective of focus groups. Hanging out with friends, exercising or playing sports, and taking time to relax were the most common responses.

### **Most Important Unhealthy Action/Decision**

Participants' responses did not vary significantly from the perspective of focus groups. Common responses included lack of sleep, unhealthy eating habits or eating fast food, letting stress build up, and use of electronics or phones. Illegal substances and vaping/Juuling were also mentioned by two out of the 26 participants who responded to this question.

### **Where to Go When Sick or For Health Questions**

Survey participants were able to check all answers that applied to them.

- Parents/Guardians – 96%
- Doctors – 78%
- Peers – 56%
- Online – 33%
- Teammates – 30%
- Teachers – 26%
- Other – 7%
  - Coaches
  - Just depends on what it is

### **Healthy Foods**

Survey participants seemed to be mildly more aware of healthy food choices than those in focus groups and answers included fruits, vegetables, proteins, salads, pasta, nuts, and beans. One participant indicated that a balanced meal is very important, while another stated that meals cooked at home are healthier. Many youth indicated a local or regional grocery store such as Dillon's or a franchise store with produce such as Walmart or Target as a place to access healthy foods. Subway, Olive Garden, Panera, and sit-down restaurants were also mentioned by participants as places to get healthy foods.

### **Where to Get Physical Activity**

Survey participants were able to check all answers that applied to them.

- Gym – 81%
- School – 67%
- Other – 41%
  - Friend's house
  - Park
  - Backyard
  - Anywhere
  - Basketball court
  - Golf course
  - Home
  - The pool
  - Club sports
- Community Center – 11%

### **Where to Go for Someone to Talk To**

Survey participants were able to check all answers that applied to them.

- Peers – 85%
- Parents/Guardians – 78%
- School Counselors – 33%
- Coach – 30%
- Teacher – 15%
- Other – 15%
  - Therapist
  - Depends on what it is
  - Church leaders

### **Do You or Your Friends Have Some Place to Go in The Community to Talk About Health?**

- Yes – 100%
- No – 0%
- If yes, check all that apply:
  - Home – 80%
  - School – 69%
  - Clinic or Hospital – 46%
  - Community Center – 4%
  - Other – 19%
    - Friend's House
    - Therapy/Therapist/Counseling

### **Barriers to Getting Help with Health Needs**

Survey participants were able to check all answers that applied to them.

- Lack of Time – 69%
- Uncertainty About How to Communicate Health Needs – 42%
- Cost – 23%
- Lack of Adult Support – 15%
- Lack of Transportation – 12%
- Other – 23%
  - Teachers piling on homework
  - Being hesitant of what others think. It's hard to tell people about the things you feel and think.
  - Lack of motivation
  - Lack of information
  - Fear of being judged

### **How Well Could You Explain Your Health Needs to Others**

- Somewhat Comfortable – 50%
- Moderately Comfortable – 31%
- Very Comfortable – 12%
- Not Comfortable at All – 8%

### **How Do You Take Care of Your Health Needs?**

Survey participants were able to check all answers that applied to them.

- Drink Water – 38%
- Exercise – 34%
- Meditate or Take Time to De-Stress – 8%
- Take Medicine as Needed – 4%
- Eat Healthy – 4%
- Other – 12%
  - I need to make sure I have enough time to do all my work
  - All of the above
  - Eat healthy, drink water, exercise

### **Who Helps You Meet Your Health Needs?**

Survey participants were able to check all answers that applied to them.

- Family – 92%
- Peers – 54%
- Doctor – 50%
- Teachers – 27%
- Therapist – 23%
- School Counselor – 23%
- Other – 8%
  - Coach
  - Friends

### **Are You Comfortable with Their Help?**

- Very Comfortable – 61%
- Moderately Comfortable – 26%
- Somewhat Comfortable – 13%
- Not Comfortable at All – 0%

### **Where Can You Learn About How to Be Healthy?**

Survey participants were able to check all answers that applied to them.

- Family – 88%
- Doctor – 77%
- Health Class – 69%
- Physical Education (Gym) Class – 69%
- Online – 42%
- Coach – 42%
- Nutrition Class – 27%
- Community Center – 4%
- Other – 0%

### **What Do You Need to Take Care of Health Needs?**

Survey participants were able to check all answers that applied to them.

- How to Talk About Health Needs – 73%
- Where to Go for Various Health Services – 62%
- Understanding Health Insurance – 50%
- Transportation to Access Services – 23%
- Other – 4%

- Efficient ways to maintain healthy diet

### **Anything Else You'd Like to Share**

- Stress...I don't know if it was said, but test and school stress is terrible
- I think that it is important that kids and teens today have a safe place they can go to talk about mental health. A lot of kids struggle with this and feel like they have no one to turn to.
- I have hypothyroidism
- I think that the main cause of mental health problems for my age is pressure to do good in school and sports. School is so important because it makes up your whole future and you are expected to do so much. Sports are just very important to some of us, and we want to do our best and be the best.

### **Themes**

Youth rely on communication with friends as a primary support for health and wellness needs so we need to provide training and resources for peer to peer support. Youth desire a stronger connection with adults that is based on trust and listening; many youth feel like they cannot rely on adults to help meet their health and wellness needs or that they are not taken seriously by adults.

Lack of trust in others and fear of judgment came up often during the focus groups, particularly related to self-disclosure and mental health. Youth expressed lack of trust in adults and, at times, their peers when getting support for their mental health and wellness needs. Fear of judgement from others came up often during conversations about mental health.

A need for resources to support the transition into young adulthood was expressed by the youth. Education around life skills, financial literacy, insurance navigation, and self-advocacy are among the topics that high school and college youth strongly desired to learn more about.

Participation in sports plays an important role in both physical and mental health for Kansas youth. It was frequently mentioned as one of the most important healthy actions and decisions they make, where they go when they have questions about how to stay healthy, where they get physical activity, how they take care of their health needs, and where they can learn how to be healthy. Coaches were also frequently mentioned when sharing where youth go for someone to talk to, where they can talk about health and how they are feeling, and who helps them meet their health needs. Sports and coaches are a vital avenue for sharing health and wellness resources with youth.

Youth perceive a distinction between physical and mental health. Most youth reported feeling comfortable discussing or seeking support for physical health, while feeling uncomfortable discussing or seeking support for mental health due to the stigma. Similarly, they have a stronger grasp of physical health resources in their communities than mental health resources. Youth report that there is distrust for and an apprehension in school health resources.

Youth reported issues with mental health struggles, time management, procrastination, stress, and sleeping habits. These issues can be interrelated and through the use of learned coping skills could be improved.

Phone usage and other technologies are reported to be both a tool for and a hindrance to health and wellness, so education around responsible technology use is needed. The internet is a key way that

youth are accessing information related to health and wellness needs and a resource hub for Kansas youth that contains health and wellness resources could be very effective in engaging and educating youth.

Many youth lacked knowledge about nutrition and reported frequently eating out as their most unhealthy habit. They reported that this is because fast food/junk food is quick, easy, and cheap and is a way to socialize with their friends, particularly in rural communities. Youth appear to want healthy, fast alternatives to eating fast food.

Youth overwhelming reported a need for both accessible health resources and places they feel comfortable spending their free time.

**Next Steps**

Information from the focus groups will be used to identify youth priority health and wellness needs and develop recommendations around adolescent health and wellness for the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. This information, along with additional research, will be utilized to develop draft toolkits for youth, parents, schools, and health care providers.