

VERMILION

NORTH

Vermilion builds a dynamic health coalition

A dedicated committee has taken Communities ChooseWell to the streets in Vermilion, earning a Creating Healthy Opportunities award as well as funding for barrier-busting with Teens and Tweens. An initial get-acquainted meeting with Alberta Health Services staff started the ball rolling, recalls Shawn Bell, then newly installed as Director of Community Services with the Town of Vermilion. “ChooseWell happened to fit right in to what we wanted to do together.” Local schools and the Be Fit For Life Centre also came aboard, forming a dynamic working group.

“It’s easy to sit as a committee and not actually have any outcomes. We wanted to make sure this is a do group – plan and do. We felt like somebody had to.”

Shawn Bell **Vermilion**

Initially, the committee concentrated on injecting healthy choices into existing happenings. They planned a Flash Mob during a local school assembly; organized a free fruit smoothie bar, street hockey and beach volleyball during Canada Day celebrations; promoted healthy food (water, milk and popcorn) during Movie-in-the-Park; encouraged healthy eating at day camps; handed out Frisbees, cookbooks, magazines, traffic safety items (and no candy) during the town parade; staffed a booth at the Vermilion Agricultural Fair.

Soon the group began tackling larger projects, focusing particularly on youth and families. They promoted ChooseWell’s 21 Days to Healthy Eating Challenge at local schools, purchasing \$200 in Subway coupons and Co-op gift cards to encourage local families to be involved. With Teens and

Tweens funding, they organized MOVE-ember to give kids active outlets during Professional Development days: free family swims, free shinny hockey, free bowling and free access to the Lakeland College gymnasium. As the ChooseWell season ended, they began planning a Family Day event at the local provincial park, drawing in the park’s conservation officer as a new recruit.

“Nothing we did was super personnel intensive,” Shawn notes. “All the locations we used have their own facilities and staff and programs – but not the level of promotion we were able to provide.” Making things free also proved a draw. “As we did more events, more kids came out, and families – so we gained momentum in that regard.”

Committee members also visited schools to ask children and youth what keeps them from being active and what they’d like to do. Shawn was struck by their level of interest in being active. “After working in schools for 12 years, I tend to think maybe fitness and being healthy is way down on their priority list, but it’s actually not. That was surprising and good to hear.” For example, some expressed interest in having healthier choices in vending machines, challenging both the school and the town to take action.

The committee supported student-led initiatives already underway in schools through VIBE (Vermilion is Being Empowered), a multidisciplinary project that promotes healthy behaviours as a way of warding off addictions and mental health issues in children and youth. As part of this three-year initiative, all three Vermilion schools have a full-time coach.



“By supporting and following through on student-led initiatives, we can demonstrate the power children and youth have to take ownership of their own health needs, building community capacity that will be sustained into adulthood.”

Shawn Bell
Vermilion

Knowing that its work is not done, the committee formed the Vermilion Wellness Coalition with the aim of drawing in an even larger network of partners. “Everybody at the table now is committed to maintaining and supporting health and nutrition throughout the year,” Shawn says. “We want to help people make good choices and build positive lifestyle habits that will derail the trend to increasing childhood obesity. We have the resources – at least the people resources – to move forward.”

ChooseWell was quite effective in providing the initial push Vermilion needed to get rolling, Shawn says. “I think their intention was to get likeminded groups together for health promotion in communities, and that has certainly worked for us.”

Continued funding would be an asset, he added. “Some of the things we’re doing now required some funding, and that will continue. The fact the group is committed is important; it would be nice to have support.”

Vermilion in Brief

Population	4,472
Location	About 60 km west of the Saskatchewan border on the Yellowhead Hwy
ChooseWell Team	Town of Vermilion, Alberta Health Services, local schools, VIBE, Be Fit For Life Centre – and growing
Recognition	Creating Healthy Opportunities
Top Tip	Enlist health champions from area schools
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