

Using Success Stories to Share Knowledge and Lessons Learned in Health Promotion

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ABSTRACT

Background: Compelling success stories, rich with details about real-life events and people, are a tool that health agencies can use to convey how their health promotion programs work, why they are successful, what lessons they have learned, and how others can launch similar programs. Success stories describe project accomplishments that are not easily captured by quantitative evaluation methods, such as surveys.

Methods: Although success stories have not been widely used in public health, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services developed a series of stories, the *Community Change Chronicles*, to highlight environmental and policy changes that promote cardiovascular health. In 2003, the Well-Integrated Screening and Evaluation for Women Across the Nation (WISEWOMAN) program used the *Community Change Chronicles* as a model to develop success stories about WISEWOMAN projects.

Results: *WISEWOMAN Works: A Collection of Success Stories from Program Inception Through 2002* includes 12 stories and offers advice on how to create and use success stories in public health. This paper reviews the rationale for developing the stories, presents one success story as an example, and describes the process used to gather information, write the stories, and produce a resource for others interested in developing success stories. We also discuss how the WISEWOMAN success stories are being used to promote women's health and cardiovascular health.

Conclusions: As the WISEWOMAN experience suggests, healthcare providers and organizations can use success stories to gain support for successful activities, inform the public about program benefits, complement other quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods, and publicly acknowledge the contributions of staff and organizational partners.

INTRODUCTION

WITHIN EVERY SUCCESSFUL HEALTH PROMOTION program are people who have compelling stories to tell. Writing their stories and sharing them with others is an effective way of convey-

ing how a program works, why it is successful, and how others can launch similar programs. Success stories give people outside the program a context for understanding events¹ and capture rich details that cannot be conveyed by numbers.² Success stories can be powerful and persuasive

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because they put a human face on a project’s challenges and achievements.

Success stories have been used extensively in business, education, and the social sciences to market services, educate staff, and document results.³⁻¹⁷ More recently, health promotion programs have started using success stories to share program accomplishments,^{18,19} evaluate programs and communicate results to funders,^{18,19} show how programs work,²⁰ report how programs have influenced individuals or organizations,^{18,19,21} and describe the efforts of ordinary people to bring about change²² (Table 1). Success stories also have been used to document return on investment or cost savings²³⁻²⁵ and measure performance for quality improvement.²⁶

The Well-Integrated Screening and Evaluation for Women Across the Nation (WISEWOMAN) program, administered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), supports 14 demonstration projects that seek to reduce heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and other chronic diseases among low-income, uninsured women aged 40–64 years. At the CDC, we are using success stories to disseminate the results of the WISEWOMAN program’s efforts to help women control their high blood pressure and high cholesterol, become more physically active, adopt healthy eating habits, and stop smoking. Although the program’s primary focus is on achieving long-term outcomes (e.g., lower rates of heart disease) that can take many years to become evident, WISEWOMAN projects need other evaluation indicators that document how they are making a difference in women’s lives. Success stories are a useful vehicle for describing more immediate outcomes (e.g., changes in women’s awareness and understanding of disease risk and prevention, changes in their access to preventive health services) and communicating these outcomes to

a broad audience of policymakers and public health professionals (Mathematica Policy Research, Washington, DC, February 21, 2003. Summary of WISEWOMAN Consultant Group Meeting II: Evaluation Planning. Final Report to CDC). Because the collection of WISEWOMAN stories describes diverse and novel health promotion projects, it provides planners with ideas and strategies for how to shape their own programs.

To learn more about the methods used to develop success stories, WISEWOMAN staff at the CDC contacted staff at the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. The department had created a series of success stories known as the *Community Change Chronicles*.¹⁸ The stories, available in print and on the Internet, highlight environmental and policy changes that promote cardiovascular health in the state. We used the *Community Change Chronicles* as a model to develop WISEWOMAN success stories. We also conducted an extensive literature search to identify other methods for developing success stories.^{1-16,27-33} We found a number of resources in the business literature^{3,5-8} and from state cooperative extension services, that have a health education component²⁷⁻³² and several resources related to specifically to health promotion.^{2,22-25,33}

The CDC publication, *WISEWOMAN Works: A Collection of Success Stories from Program Inception Through 2002*,¹⁹ features 12 success stories and offers advice on how to create and use success stories in public health. Here, we present one success story as an example and describe the 10 steps we followed to gather information, write the stories, and produce a resource on developing success stories. We also discuss how the WISEWOMAN success stories are being used to promote women’s health at the national, state, and local levels.

TABLE 1. USES OF SUCCESS STORIES IN HEALTH PROMOTION

Share accomplishments ^{18,19}
Evaluate programs and report results to funders ^{18,19}
Show how programs work ²⁰
Report program influences on individuals and organizations ^{18,19,21}
Influence attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and behaviors ²¹
Describe ordinary people’s efforts to bring about change ²²
Document cost savings ²³⁻²⁵
Measure performance for quality improvement ²⁶

A SUCCESS STORY IN RURAL ALASKA

In the success story shown in Figure 1, we were able to convey some vivid details about a WISEWOMAN project that serves women living in Klukwan, an ancient Indian village located in rural southeastern Alaska.

The story begins in the same manner as all WISEWOMAN success stories, with a brief description of the public health problem being targeted by the project. This project, led by the

WISEWOMAN Partners With Chilkat Indian Village, Incorporates Cultural Traditions To Promote Fitness

Alaska Native Women Are More Active as a Result

Klukwan is an ancient Tlingit village of about 100 residents located on the banks of the Chilkat River. With about 60 inches of snow, rain, or sleet falling each year, Klukwan has only 3 months of mild weather each year. The village has no sidewalks, but there is an eagle-watching path just south of the village where some residents walk on mild weather days. However, concerns about dogs and bears keep some residents from walking outside. The lack of sidewalks, harsh weather, and threat of dogs and bears were preventing many people from being physically active outdoors. Klukwan Fitness Center staff worked with the SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium's WISEWOMAN project (SEARHC) to address this problem.

It all started when the fitness center offered a spacious room where SEARHC Health Educator Ellen Carey-Starr could hold lifestyle classes. Ellen also saw a chance to encourage women to become physically active by offering them access to the center's fitness equipment and classes. She met with members of the Chilkat Indian Village in Klukwan, Alaska. They liked her ideas and formed a partnership to allow women participating in SEARHC's WISEWOMAN project to use Klukwan Fitness Center for half price. The Chilkat Indian Village printed passes allowing the women to use the center for half price. SEARHC bought the passes and sold them to women in the WISEWOMAN project so they could begin using the fitness center.

The SEARHC staff and the Chilkat Indian Village Tribal Services staff also collaborated to create Ravens Versus Eagles, an annual fitness competition that builds on cultural traditions and encourages women to be physically active. The competition's name has special meaning for women in Klukwan, because every member of the Tlingit Tribe is linked to either the Raven or Eagle moiety. SEARHC staff members use posters and monthly calendars to promote the 3-month event. Women participating in the competition receive a monthly calendar to record the amount of time

they spend being active each day. Women get 1 point for every 30 minutes they are physically active.

At the end of the 3-month competition, SEARHC staff host a dinner celebration to honor the women who complete and turn in their calendars. Each woman receives a wrapped gift such as a sandwich cooler bag or water bottle. Many women attending the dinner say the competition has had a positive effect on their health. Some women say they feel better, whereas others talk about losing inches around their waist. One woman lowered her cholesterol level by 30 points. Other women have been motivated by these successes.

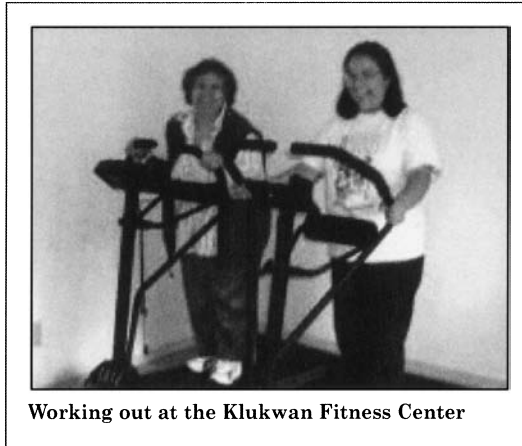
Importance of Success

Sponsoring reduced-cost passes to the fitness center has allowed more women to have access to facilities that promote physical activity. The Chilkat Indian Village partnership has helped SEARHC's WISEWOMAN enrollees afford the fitness center, improved use of the facility, and encouraged women to walk more during the Ravens Versus Eagles competition. Such partnerships are cost-beneficial because they can increase use of community

fitness facilities and provide participants with low-cost access to these facilities.

Lessons Learned

- Consider offering reduced-cost passes to a fitness center as a way to promote physical activity for low-income participants and get more women to use the fitness center.
- Look for partners who can help you stretch your existing resources.
- Consider creative ways to develop activities that build on cultural traditions and that link lifestyle changes to lower blood pressure and cholesterol. Ravens Versus Eagles activities encourage women to record the time they are active, both daily and over time. Such activities help women become more aware of how lifestyle changes lower their blood pressure and cholesterol levels.



Working out at the Klukwan Fitness Center

Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC), seeks to remove barriers that prevent rural Alaska Native women from being physically active. To convey the challenges of physical activity in Klukwan and help readers empathize with the women living there, it was essential to describe the village’s outdoor environment and harsh climate. The story allows readers to imagine themselves walking along an eagle-watching path, looking over their shoulders in fear of an attack from a bear.

Next, the story acknowledges the accomplishments and resourcefulness of the visionary health educator who came up with the idea of offering underserved women access to the Klukwan Fitness Center, and it describes how she brought various partners together. The story also describes the project-sponsored Ravens Versus Eagles competition, illustrating how the project built upon the village’s cultural traditions to help women become more physically active. Feedback from project participants conveys how the project has influenced women’s lifestyles and health.

The center of the page features a photograph of two women, smiling as they work out at the Klukwan Fitness Center. Pictures are powerful because they allow readers to see the real people who are involved. All 12 success stories in *WISEWOMAN Works* feature a center photograph, graphic illustration, or quote to draw readers in, break up the text, and make the layout interesting and easy to read.

As the story discusses the Klukwan project’s successes, it focuses on the partnerships that have been formed with businesses and tribal groups and the resulting benefits for these partners and women in the community. The story highlights individual health benefits as well as economic benefits resulting from increased use of the community fitness center. Including such information can strengthen success stories and allow project staff to use a story to promote awareness of broader benefits not directly related to health.

The story ends by providing lessons learned to help other health promotion programs apply the story’s ideas to their own settings. The lessons, shared by project staff, encourage other health promotion programs to develop new partnerships, try new strategies to promote physical activity, and build on a community’s unique culture.

TEN STEPS FOR CREATING SUCCESS STORIES

We followed 10 steps to develop the WISEWOMAN success stories and publish a resource for the program (Table 2). Before beginning to collect information for the stories, we contacted the *Community Change Chronicles* writer in North Carolina to gather background information and discuss using the state’s story layout and data collection form as a model.

TABLE 2. TEN STEPS USED TO DEVELOP WISEWOMAN SUCCESS STORIES

Step	Activities carried out by WISEWOMAN
1. Identify audience and purpose	Decided to target multiple audiences and to develop a resource to disseminate information about WISEWOMAN project successes, inspire others to replicate these successes, and help others develop and use success stories
2. Develop systematic process	Developed plan for nominating, writing, and disseminating stories
3. Develop standardized form	Adapted <i>Community Change Chronicles</i> ¹⁸ data collection form
4. Collect story ideas	Received nominations for 12 story ideas from 6 projects and used standardized form to collect information
5. Conduct interviews	Conducted interviews with state WISEWOMAN project staff to fill in gaps, provide details, and obtain quotes
6. Develop appealing format	Adapted <i>Community Change Chronicles</i> story layout
7. Write and revise stories	Produced first drafts (CDC staff and success stories editor) and obtained revisions from state WISEWOMAN contributors, who also approved final versions
8. Organize stories	Identified four themes and categorized stories by primary theme
9. Design and print publication	Designed, laid out, and prepared publication for printing
10. Disseminate publication	Disseminated print and web versions within CDC, to state WISEWOMAN staff, at professional conferences, and through targeted mailings to national organizations

1. Identify intended audience and purpose of the publication

We decided to target multiple audiences, including decision makers, healthcare professionals, and organizations that reach underserved women. We agreed that the publication's purpose would be to share information about the WISEWOMAN projects' successes, inspire health departments and others to adopt some of these successful strategies in their programs, and help others develop and use their own success stories to promote public health. Thus, the publication includes not only the WISEWOMAN success stories but also special sections on how to develop success stories and adapt the stories to reach different audiences or convey different themes.

2. Develop a systematic process to identify successful accomplishments

We developed a list of themes for the publication and created a timeline for completion. On one of the monthly conference calls with the 12 demonstration projects, we communicated our plans with state WISEWOMAN project coordinators and directors, provided staff with information about the *Community Change Chronicles* as an example, and answered questions.

3. Develop a standardized form to collect information

The *Community Change Chronicles* writer used a data collection form designed to produce stories that illustrate policy and environmental changes resulting from cardiovascular disease prevention interventions or efforts.^{18,34–36} Because we wanted the WISEWOMAN stories to focus on more immediate project accomplishments, we modified the North Carolina form to capture successful intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational strategies used by WISEWOMAN projects. The result was a 4-page data collection form.

4. Collect story ideas

CDC staff gave WISEWOMAN project coordinators and directors information about the purpose of the success stories and the types of stories desired. We then asked them to nominate ideas for success stories by completing our standardized data collection form or by proposing ideas during site visits or phone calls with CDC project officers.

Project staff were encouraged to submit multiple story ideas, with the goal of obtaining enough stories (ideally at least 12) to cover a broad range of program practices.² Over a 6-month period in 2002, six of the WISEWOMAN projects submitted 12 potential ideas for success stories to CDC staff. Contributors (those who completed and submitted the forms) were not always the WISEWOMAN project directors and coordinators; in some cases, story ideas came from community health workers with the health agencies that provide WISEWOMAN services at the local level.

5. Conduct interviews

After contributors submitted the data collection forms, CDC staff reviewed the information for completeness. We then interviewed each contributor to obtain information needed to complete the story and identify potential themes. We prepared questions in advance to identify basic information gaps (who, what, when, where, and how), gather detailed project descriptions, and obtain more information about lessons learned. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes. We used the data collection forms to document all responses, including verbatim quotes. We also asked each contributor to provide action photographs of project participants, graphics, or a quote to complement the story. All 12 stories were complete and relevant enough to be included in the publication.

6. Develop a consistent and appealing format

Using the *Community Change Chronicles* story layout as a guide, we designed a layout for the WISEWOMAN success stories that highlights project accomplishments and successful strategies. Each success story is presented on two facing pages. The left-hand page provides basic information about the project: the title, the project location, the story's focus, the strategy highlighted in the story, the levels of success achieved, project results, and contact information. The right-hand page presents the actual success story (Fig. 1), which includes an attention-grabbing statement of need. The story is written in an appealing, easy-to-read magazine format. In the center of the story is either a compelling quote or an interesting photograph or graphic. Each story includes the following components.

Title. The title conveys the story's main theme, usually by describing the purpose of the public health intervention and the women being tar-

geted. Whenever possible, we include the word WISEWOMAN in the title.

Statement of need. Stories begin with a brief and compelling statement to explain the public health problem or need being addressed.

Project details. The story includes process information, such as who was involved in the project, what time period is covered in the story, and how the project staff, participants, or community partners achieved success. Some stories also provide important cost or funding information and describe particular strategies or levels of influence.

Main results. Each story briefly summarizes the successful results, both intended and unintended, that project staff observed. Many of the stories look beyond staff accomplishments and focus on the participating women and community partners. For example, in several success stories, the main results focus on individual women serving as role models and their success in recruiting other women into the WISEWOMAN project. In other stories, the focus is on how community partners collaborated to stretch scarce resources and expand women's access to vital healthcare services.

Lessons learned. The stories conclude by identifying key elements that made the featured success happen, focusing on what worked and, in some cases, what did not work. This section also offers advice to help others replicate these steps to success in their communities.

Identifying information. Footers identify each story by number and name the state or agency leading the project.

7. Write and revise stories

To write the first draft of the stories, CDC staff used the data collection form to obtain basic information, supplemented by details and verbatim quotes from the interview notes. After a first draft was complete, each story underwent many rounds of review, revision, and editing—back and forth between CDC staff, an editor, and contributors in the states—requiring anywhere from 3 to 20 drafts. When CDC staff had developed a near-final draft of each one-page story, we sent the draft back to the contributors for review. After the contributors' comments were incorporated, the sto-

ries were reviewed by CDC staff (other than the story writers) to ensure integrity, consistency, and completeness of information. Before the book of success stories was published, contributors were given another opportunity to make changes and provide final approval.

8. Organize the stories

Once we had final drafts of all 12 stories, we identified four common themes within the stories: expanding access, reaching culturally diverse women, women helping women, and developing partnerships. Not all stories fit neatly into one category, and some stories contained multiple themes. To help readers find the strategies most relevant to their own programs, we categorized the stories according to the one theme best illustrated by the story.

9. Design and print the publication

After design and layout, the book was prepared for printing. We initially printed 2000 copies.

10. Disseminate the publication

We sent copies of *WISEWOMAN Works* to a broad range of individuals. First, WISEWOMAN project staff, including story contributors, received multiple copies. Second, we compiled a mailing list of key CDC decision makers (e.g., policy planners, evaluators, financial managers), CDC staff who work with healthcare providers in state public health programs, and others at the CDC who could help disseminate *WISEWOMAN Works* to public health professionals nationwide. Third, we sent copies to national advocacy organizations (e.g., American Heart Association, women's health coalitions) and made presentations and disseminated copies at national conferences attended by public health professionals in the fields of women's health and chronic disease prevention. Interested professionals can also download the complete book or individual success stories from the CDC website.¹⁹

HOW SUCCESS STORIES ARE BEING USED

WISEWOMAN Works was published in March 2003. The success stories have since been used to promote women's health and cardiovascular health in a variety of ways. At the CDC, the sto-

ries have been used to educate staff about the WISEWOMAN program, share lessons learned thus far, raise awareness about the challenges these projects face, and help others realize the many opportunities available to address the needs of uninsured women at the community level. CDC WISEWOMAN staff also use the publication when providing technical assistance to state public health professionals. The CDC has shared copies of the book with decision makers who have been interested in the WISEWOMAN program over the past decade. One member of Congress is using *WISEWOMAN Works* to educate others about the health needs of uninsured women and to inform them about the WISEWOMAN program's successes.

At the state level, WISEWOMAN contacts have shared copies of the book with governors' offices, health departments, and other key decision makers to inform them of the program's achievements. In one state, the governor recently included several WISEWOMAN success stories in his budget message to decision makers in an effort to emphasize the need for cardiovascular disease prevention programs. The success stories showed the decision makers, in human terms, how some of the state's cardiovascular disease prevention activities are making a difference. In addition, a state health department has used the success stories to educate local contractors participating in both the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP) and WISEWOMAN.

Locally, one WISEWOMAN project has used success stories to acknowledge the contributions of its organizational partners in the community. After the success stories were widely publicized, a key partner whose role was highlighted in one of the stories realized its contributions were appreciated and decided to remain involved with the WISEWOMAN project.

DISCUSSION

The WISEWOMAN program's experience of collecting, writing, and disseminating success stories offers a number of valuable lessons that may be helpful to other health promotion programs. First, program managers should talk with their staff about the product they plan to produce (e.g., a collection of stories, a web document, a how-to guide), the intended audiences, and ways

in which the product will be used. It is helpful to be specific and write a description of the product, the audiences, and the intended uses. This step can guide the story-writing process and make it more efficient.

Second, those involved in writing the stories should have adequate writing and interviewing skills and plan to conduct extensive interviews with key project staff to capture details not provided on the data collection forms. In our experience, interviews often highlight unexpected benefits of health promotion efforts, such as the formation of new community partnerships that lead to the expansion of existing resources and stronger, more stable projects. The value of including such information is that it allows stories to illustrate the wide range of successes that can occur in a project's early years.

Third, early in the planning phase, all collaborators should know what will be expected of them and be willing to participate. Reviewers who are willing and ready to critique the stories, provide feedback, and meet deadlines can ensure that the review process goes smoothly. Time must be budgeted to review, edit, and make multiple revisions to each story.

Finally, planning for dissemination of success stories should begin well before the scheduled release date. It can be helpful to allocate one staff person to the time-consuming task of creating a mailing list and other dissemination activities. Scheduling the product's release to coincide with an important health conference or observance (e.g., National Women's Health Week) can also help generate greater awareness about the successes highlighted in the stories.

Success stories have great potential to broaden awareness of effective health promotion interventions. To date, however, the merits of success stories to complement quantitative evaluation strategies have not been widely recognized, perhaps because descriptions of the methods and tools used to develop success stories are not often published or shared at professional conferences. The methods described in this paper offer guidance to help other public health professionals use this valuable technique to document and share examples of how their community-based programs are achieving success in the early years—experiences that otherwise might go unreported. By contributing to and building the limited body of success story literature, public health professionals can document accomplishments,

market programs, demonstrate the value of programs to decision makers, and promote wider discussion of best practices and successful community initiatives.^{26,34-36}

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