



## SUCCESS STORY

# Community Learns to Take Action

### Community activism improves living standards



Photo: USAID

Sergey Mikhailov exercises in a gym built as a result of the Louchegorsk Community Action Plan.

***“When people are united by a common idea it is easy to make it work. Initiators of the [gym] project faced many difficulties but they managed to succeed. Now it is very pleasant to see the result of collaborative work,” said O. Kozlova, a local reporter.***

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Louchegorsk is a town in northern Primorskiy Kray, a territory in the Russian Far East. Coal is the city’s main industry, one of its primary employers, and the cornerstone of the town’s economy. Over the years, lack of attention to environmental threats associated with coal production has increased health risks for the town’s 24,000 residents. Local organizations have long struggled to address this, but they lacked experience in conducting public information campaigns and generating support. Without a coordinated effort to address health concerns, the community was making little progress in resolving the issue.

In September 2004, USAID sponsored a program to develop an action plan in Louchegorsk to address key community problems. The program formed an “initiative group” tasked with increasing community involvement and conducting a survey to identify the main issues that concerned residents. Residents then discussed those issues at a widely-attended community forum. This discussion resulted in a number of proposals to resolve pressing problems. Forum participants voted for the proposal they felt would benefit their community the most. The top three proposals were put to action. Using the community action plan model, representatives from local government, schools, businesses, and organizations formed a working group for each project, and each group submitted a project proposal to USAID.

One of the proposals aimed at improving community health by educating residents about health and building a sports center. A local organization, “First Light,” took the initiative to make this proposal a reality. They convinced the government to provide rent-free space and pay utilities and trainers’ salaries and persuaded businesses to provide materials to remodel the gym. The gym is now equipped with treadmills and other cardiovascular exercise equipment as well as weight-training equipment.

The people of Louchegorsk are now learning about and improving their health through exercise. The gym has already made an impact — 130 children diagnosed with various health problems are attending a special afternoon exercise program. In addition, the project’s accomplishments go beyond improved health — its example has shown people in this town that, through community activism, they can make a difference.