

**“Wellness in Appalachia:
Holistic Approaches to a Healthy Region”**

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Final Report Narrative

Name of Project: Wellness in Appalachia: Holistic Approaches to a Healthy Region

Grant Period: February 1, 2011 – June 30, 2012

Grantee Name: Theresa Burriss Project Director: Theresa Burriss

Description of Project:

Although this year's project began on a broad scale looking at the overall health of the region, the students narrowed their scope to focus on a small, troubled community close to Radford University, namely the town of Pulaski, VA. After embarking on a tour of the town with the economic development officer, Mr. John White, the students asked him to identify the community's greatest challenge. He responded, "Drug abuse." Based on this information, the students realized they had to propose culturally sensitive, cost-effective solutions to this epidemic before residents of Pulaski could address other challenges, such as unemployment, bankruptcy, and physical and mental health problems. Although the students discovered various treatment options through their research, most were cost-prohibitive. Therefore, they proposed Sober Living Environments as a viable option to help recovering addicts remain clean.

Activities:

Mr. John White, the Pulaski Economic Development Officer, provided a tour of the town to the students and shared various research materials with them. This fieldtrip was vital in the students' understanding of the problems, challenges, assets, and strengths of the community and its residents. The students also communicated with the executive director of Pulaski Community Partners Coalition (PCPC) and gathered information from the Coalition, a nonprofit organization with a mission to promote "healthy families and a safe Pulaski County by connecting people, resources and ideas." Finally, the students worked with One Care of Southwest Virginia, another nonprofit whose mission involves a commitment "to decreasing substance abuse and misuse, and related social, economic and health factors through planning, policy, data, and advocacy." Mr. Carl Mitchell, executive director at the time, provided vital information and insight to the students. As a result of the students' work with these different organizations and town representatives, they had a much better grasp of the magnitude of the problem and were able to focus their research on the different types of drug abuse in the Southwest Virginia region and how the statistics compared/contrasted specifically with Pulaski.

Project Outcomes:

- Students created a poster that documented their research on Pulaski, its history and current status. The poster contained contemporary demographics, historical photos, and statistical charts to

compare and contrast Pulaski with the greater Commonwealth of Virginia and other Southwest Virginia counties.

- Students created a PowerPoint presentation that highlighted their fieldtrip, data gathering from the nonprofit organizations, additional research, and proposed solutions to the drug abuse problem in Pulaski. The presentation also included success rates of Sober Living Environments.
- Students set up their poster at the Appalachian Teaching Project (ATP) conference in Northern Virginia in December of 2011 for other participating schools' students and Appalachian Regional Commission officials to view.
- Students provided an oral presentation, utilizing their PowerPoint, at the December 2011 ATP conference in Northern Virginia.
- Students participated in the March 2012 Appalachian Studies Association conference in Indiana, PA, by providing an oral presentation on Friday, March 23, at 3:30 p.m. They used their PowerPoint slides to provide visual aids during the oral presentation.
- Students offered the same oral presentation with PowerPoint slides at the February, 1, 2012 Appalachian Arts & Studies in the Schools teacher workshop on Radford University's campus.

Problems Encountered:

This was the first year Radford University students focused on Pulaski and specifically its drug abuse problems. As a result, they were able to share only preliminary research and provide only speculation on the effectiveness of Sober Living Environments (SLE) with certain audiences. Because SLE's are still a relatively new approach to sobriety in the United States, long-term data were not available. The students did not share this initial research with Pulaski officials because they believed they needed more robust statistics and in-depth information about SLE's to be helpful in the town's efforts to provide other options to recovering addicts.

Program Continuation and Sustainability:

Unfortunately, Pulaski faces great challenges with the drug abuse problems among many of its residents. A simple solution does not exist because several factors contribute to the epidemic, including economic depression, low education attainment, lack of rehabilitation services, learned helplessness, and cultural stigma of mental health issues. In the future, students could focus on any number of these community issues to help officials and residents create solutions and increase overall wellness of the community. The arts and nature may be two creative venues to address drug abuse problems and instill a greater sense of self-worth among residents struggling to overcome addiction.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

If Radford University students were to continue with this project, they will need to research Sober Living Environments much more in-depth to provide Pulaski town officials with robust data on the SLE's effectiveness, both in terms of cost and resident long-term sobriety. Perhaps the students could assist officials with grant writing to secure funding for such an initiative.