

# Supporting a Culture of Wellness in New Ulm



Heart of New Ulm  
Supporting a culture of wellness

Health care is moving beyond hospital and clinic walls and out into communities. In New Ulm, Minn., the Heart of New Ulm has been paving the way.

Since 2009, the Heart of New Ulm (HONU) has been helping people in New Ulm, Minn., improve their health. The project began as a 10-year population health research project that was a collaborative partnership of the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation (MHIF), Allina Health and the New Ulm community designed to help residents reduce their risk for heart disease. It offered a unique environment for studying how various interventions, systems and environmental improvements, along with policy changes, can impact the health of an entire community.

Today, the Heart of New Ulm continues as a community-owned health initiative being sustained through community partnership and funding. It is focused on three significant

and widespread health issues: 1) Healthy lifestyles across the lifespan, 2) Mental health and 3) Addiction and risky use of substances.

Results big and small have converged to transform the community and propel a shift to a culture where health is a shared value for all. The project's success is a result of fostering an exceptional level of engagement among residents and partners; implementing an integrated, evidence-based approach; and nurturing supportive environments — especially food and built environments.

Throughout the project, leaders have rigorously measured and reported outcomes, and developed leadership approaches that are being replicated. Today, the project continues to capture the attention of health care thought leaders on regional, national and international levels.



Image credit: Diabetic Living magazine feature article

“ Improving population health at the community level — literally, it takes a village. We have to make it easy for people to do the right things. That's why I was so impressed in getting a deeper understanding of what's going on in New Ulm. That they've made it the default, easy, right thing to do: to exercise ... to buy healthy food ... to ride your bike ... there are some amazing social changes happening in that town. ”

— David Nash, MD, MBA  
Dean, College of Population Health,  
Thomas Jefferson University  
*As shared in the documentary, “The Story of  
New Ulm: A Population Health Transformation”*

# Shifted environments support a culture of health

Throughout the community — from restaurants and grocery stores to worksites, schools and homes — residents in New Ulm pride themselves on how their culture has transformed to make the healthy choice the easier choice where they live, work and play.

## It's easier to eat well

New Ulm has made healthful eating easy by improving access, availability, identification and promotion of healthier food choices.

■ HONU launched a **restaurant program** in 2011 and today, more than half of all eating establishments in New Ulm partner with the project to make healthier eating easier while dining out. Diners now enjoy more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, healthier fats, options with fewer total calories and other healthier choices. Across *all* restaurants in New Ulm, improvements since 2011 include:

- 84% now offer **non-fried vegetables**, up from 63%
- 38% now offer **whole grain bread**, up from 25%
- 53% now offer **fruit**, up from 41%
- 72% now offer **smaller portions**, up from 31%

■ Access to fresh local produce has increased with the opening of a **new community co-op** in 2013, the expansion of the **farmers market** and growth in **community-supported agriculture (CSA)** programs.

■ **Local grocery and convenience stores** have partnered with the project on various campaigns and offer healthier choices.

■ Since 2013, the **New Ulm Community Garden** has made it easier for people to grow and eat more fruits and vegetables; rental plots consistently sell out. The garden also partners with the school's summer latchkey program to provide kids with experiential learning.

■ The New Ulm Public School District has developed a **comprehensive educational approach** to build students' knowledge and skills related to growing food and healthy options.

- Education and exposure starts during the early childhood years, where kids have small beds for gardens and pollinators.
- In 2017, a new school garden at Jefferson Elementary School was initiated by the students themselves.
- At the new high school that opened in 2017, a greenhouse and aquaponics operation is used by both the Agriculture and Family and Consumer Sciences departments for teaching students about growing foods and preparing healthier meals.



“ I don't know when it seemed to be cost-effective to participate in The Heart of New Ulm's restaurant program, but suddenly it was. We were starting to lose customers because we had this heavy meat-and-potato menu. When we started adding salads, I was blown away at how many we went through. It was like somebody flipped a switch. The Heart of New Ulm has changed the town. ”

— Virginia Suker Moldan, former manager, Turner Hall, as quoted in *EatingWell* magazine



## It's easier to be physically active

New Ulm has engaged community volunteers in creating policies and helping improve the built environment to make it easier and safer for people to be physically active.

- The New Ulm City Council adopted a **Complete Streets policy** in 2016 to ensure streets are planned and designed to be accessible and safe for all users, including people walking or biking.
- In 2014-15, **outdoor fitness equipment** was added to three local parks, making it convenient for everyone in the community to have access to workout equipment.
- The League of American Bicyclists designated New Ulm as a **Bicycle Friendly Community** at the Bronze level in 2017 and 2021, which recognizes that it provides safe accommodations for bicycling and encourages people to bike for transportation and recreation.
- **Physical enhancements to support bicycling included:**
  - Completed signage on low-volume traffic streets for a 12-mile bike route
  - Installed dedicated bike lanes and a mid-block median crossing on a busy street near the schools
  - Installed bike racks featuring the project's logo at 22 local businesses and nonprofits
  - Painted sharrows (shared bike lane markings) on 8 miles of designated bike routes, with 13 miles designated as routes
- **Educational and encouragement initiatives to support bicycling and walking included:**
  - Created maps of safe biking and walking routes; organizing an annual community Bike Expo focused on safety
  - Offered the availability of 30 new bikes and a trailer through Community Education for schools and community partners to use to help promote safe biking and healthy physical activity
  - Coordinated annual Walk and Bike to School Day activities with public and parochial schools
  - Launched safety campaigns for drivers to be more alert to people walking and biking and follow the rules of the road

“ Complete Streets in New Ulm is more than just making our streets pedestrian and bicycle-friendly — this effort can be life changing. It's helping encourage people to get out of their cars and become healthier. Our streets can become entertaining, visually appealing and safer, offer convenience, and invite us outdoors. Several generations may benefit from our work in many ways. ”

— Dan Beranek, member,  
New Ulm Coalition for Active,  
Safe and Healthy Streets



# Engagement drives success

Effectively engaging and empowering all community stakeholders and building a shared vision has been critical to HONU's success. HONU has engaged representatives from health care, city government, county public health, local chamber of commerce, school district, college, employers, churches, media and the general community in developing and embracing project initiatives.

- In addition to the project's 12-member Community Leadership Team, more than **80 community volunteers representing 35 organizations** do the project's work through their service on various project Action Teams.
- Throughout the project, HONU has **maintained 90 percent brand awareness** among community members by marketing a way of life with messages that penetrated the entire community and helped propel a shift to a culture where health is the new norm.
- **A strong focus on community capacity building** has included local trainings, as well as provided the opportunity for community members to attend national and state conferences to learn about various policies, systems and environmental improvements and why they work.

“ It's been inspiring to see individuals and organizations throughout New Ulm come together and truly make community health a top priority. It's positively impacting our local workforce, business climate and tourism, and helping ensure that our rural community can continue to prosper and thrive. ”

— Audra Shaneman, former president, New Ulm Area Chamber of Commerce

# An integrated, evidence-based, data-driven approach

Often community change is expected to happen one program at a time, however; it's a comprehensive approach that truly moves the needle. HONU has expertly integrated and connected programs, strategies, services and evidence-based approaches across all sectors of the community, health care, worksites and the environment.

- For example, **more than 40 of the area's largest 100 employers now have active wellness programming** — an increase from only five in 2009. Employers have encouraged their employees to participate in health screenings, offered worksite wellness programs, created policies such as healthier vending options, established tobacco-free worksites, promoted community programs and more.
- Critical to the success of the project has been **engagement with stakeholders in various sectors to utilize data** from electronic health records, community health screenings, community needs assessments and environmental assessments to assist with engagement, change management, measurement and progress assessment.



# Health Improvement Among New Ulm Adults 40–79

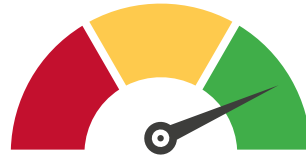
*Selected Highlights  
Since 2009*

## Healthier Lifestyles



**Physical Activity**

**88%** of people surveyed in 2018 reported getting 150 minutes a week of moderate physical activity; up from 63% in 2009 <sup>1,2</sup>



**Bicycling and Walking  
for Transportation**

**25%** of people surveyed in 2018 bike or walk one time or more a week for transportation, up from 23% in 2015 <sup>1,3</sup>



**Daily Fruits  
and Vegetables**

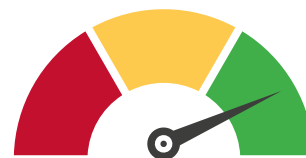
**12%** of people surveyed in 2018 reported eating five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day, a decrease from 17% in 2009 <sup>1,2</sup>

## Clinical Outcomes



**LDL Cholesterol**

**73%** of people have their LDL cholesterol within the recommended range according to 2018 data, up from 69% in 2009 <sup>4,5</sup>



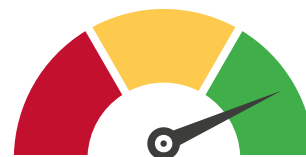
**Blood Pressure**

**88%** of people have their blood pressure within the recommended range according to 2018 data, up from 79% in 2009 <sup>4,5</sup>



**Overweight/Obese**

**83%** of people are overweight according to 2018 data, an increase from 78% in 2009 <sup>4,2</sup>



**Smoking**

**11%** of people smoke according to 2018 data, a decrease from 14% in 2009 <sup>4,5</sup>

### FACT

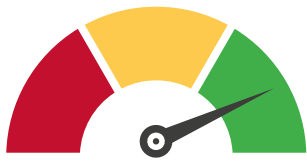
When people have their blood pressure and cholesterol in good control, don't smoke and maintain a normal weight, it reduces their risk for heart disease and stroke, improves their quality of life and decreases medical costs.



## About the Data

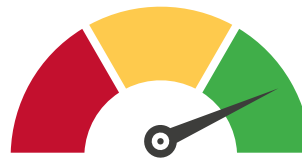
The information provided in this report is intended to measure health outcomes for The Heart of New Ulm Project's target population of 40-79-year-old residents of the 56073 zip code as researched by the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation® and New Ulm Medical Center. Data provided here comes from multiple sources that were collected over the project's 10-year research timeframe. It is important to note that due to different data collection methods, these data sources may not be exactly comparable with each other. The data presented here provide the best available estimate of health status at baseline and at 10 years. Visit [mplsheart.org/rhtc](http://mplsheart.org/rhtc) for more information.

# A Community That Supports Health and Wellness



## Healthy Lifestyle Support

**94%** of adults agreed or strongly agreed that New Ulm creates an environment that supports a healthy lifestyle, compared with just under 77% in a comparison Minnesota community. <sup>1</sup>



## Healthier Dining Options

**66%** of adults felt that many healthy food options are available when eating in a New Ulm restaurant, compared with only 58% of respondents in a comparison Minnesota community that felt that way about their restaurants. <sup>1</sup>

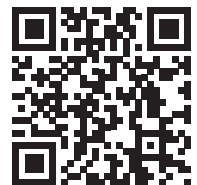
## The work that got us here

- Health screenings
- Physical activity programming
- Community health challenges
- Phone coaching for individuals at high risk for heart disease or diabetes
- Cooking demonstrations
- Expanding the farmers market
- Promotion of Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs
- Education and motivation programming
- Worksite wellness
- Physician education
- Comprehensive communications and social marketing campaigns such as SWAP IT to DROP IT® and SEE.SAFE.SMART.
- Restaurant recognition program
- Adoption of Complete Streets policy
- Tobacco-free worksites
- Healthier vending and concession policies



## FEATURE DOCUMENTARY

A 20-minute documentary, produced by Health Catalyst, highlights the importance of the Heart of New Ulm from a national health care perspective.



Watch it online at  
<https://tinyurl.com/HONUVideo>

## Sources

1. Survey responses from 1,092 randomly selected New Ulm adults age 40-79 in 2018 and a survey of a comparable Minnesota rural community.
2. Population-level changes in lifestyle risk factors for cardiovascular disease in the Heart of New Ulm Project. *Preventive Medicine Reports* (2019).
3. Survey responses from 482 randomly selected New Ulm adults in 2015.
4. New Ulm Medical Center Electronic Health Record Data 2018.
5. 2009 baseline data; included in Changes in Cardiovascular Risk Factors After 5 Years of Implementation of a Population-Based Program to Reduce Cardiovascular Disease: The Heart of New Ulm Project. *American Heart Journal* (2016).

# A trailblazer for population health, nationally and regionally

## Research, publications and presentations

- Results and learnings published extensively in both non-peer and peer-reviewed journals, including the *Journal of the American Heart Association*, *Population Health Management*, *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*, *Clinical Medicine & Research*, *Preventing Chronic Disease*
  - More than 65 poster sessions and presentations, including at the Scientific Sessions for both the American Heart Association and American Diabetes Association, as well as numerous national and local conferences in worksite health promotion, nutrition and dietetics, physical activity, public health, epidemiology, nursing and medical informatics
- Links to articles, posters and presentations available at <https://tinyurl.com/HONURResearch>
- Highlighted in feature articles in Twin Cities, Minn., media, in *EatingWell* and *Diabetic Living* magazines, as well as various professional health care publications



## ENGAGEMENT LEARNING GUIDE

“The Power of True Engagement for Population Health” learning guide was created by Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation’s population health team, in conjunction with AcademyHealth.



Download it at  
[www.tinyurl.com/CmtyEngagement](http://www.tinyurl.com/CmtyEngagement)

## Awards

- 2018 Heart-Healthy Stroke Free Award from the National Forum for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention
- 2014 winner of the prestigious American Hospital Association NOVA award recognizing effective, collaborative programs focused on improving community health
- 2014 winner of the Community Benefit Award (small hospital category) from the Minnesota Hospital Association (along with partner New Ulm Medical Center)
- Various other awards for conference poster presentations, individual team member accomplishments and health information/communications

## Health care leadership

- Selected to join the Community Health Peer Learning Program, a national peer learning collaborative managed by AcademyHealth through an award from the Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology
- Selected by the University of Kentucky’s College of Public Health as one of 10 projects from a field of 160 nominees to be included in a study of successful collaborative partnerships focused on improving community health
- Selected for participation in the 2015 National Leadership Academy for the Public’s Health, a year-long training program funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to help advance leadership skills
- Visited by U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Regina Benjamin in 2012
- Invited to meet with the National IT Health coordinator to discuss the project and the innovative ways it uses the electronic health record (EHR); also invited to meet with leaders from EHR companies EPIC and Cerner
- Invited to meet with the USDA Undersecretary in Washington D.C., in 2014 to share information on the project’s nutrition environment work
- Received numerous requests from cities and health care systems throughout the country for more information on the project, as well as guidance on creating similar programs and replication

