

Telling Missouri's Public Health Stories



The Sky's the Limit

The brand new Pickering Health Complex outside of Hermitage, Missouri offers Hickory County residents increased opportunities to build healthier lifestyles. In June 2018, the Hickory County Health Department moved from its 1,900 square foot brick facility in downtown Hermitage to a brand new 5,000 square foot building outside of town.



In addition to regular offices and a small conference room, the building contains two exam rooms, a secure room for staff safety, and an environmental laboratory. Administrator Dawn Vader says having a state certified water lab will allow staff to test water samples on site and reduce turnaround time.

With funding for local public health being cut every year, Hickory County Health Department had to get creative to piece together funding for the expansion.

"We first began a few years back creating a not-for-profit corporation and applying for 501c3 status with the IRS," explains Vader. "The title for the land that was owned by the health department was transferred to ownership by the not-for-profit."

Vader adds, the not-for-profit, Friends of Hickory County Health Department, submitted a funding application to the Neighborhood Assistance Program through Missouri's Department of Economic Development (DED). The program encourages local donations for which the DED issues up to 70% in tax credits to eligible taxpayers.

She says, "Private donors were solicited for charitable donations to the not-for-profit. This [NAP] application was prepared in close partnership with our regional planning commission."

The NAP program generated \$485,000 for construction of the new building. The Health Department added \$75,000 from the sale of their old building and another \$75,000 from reserve funds. Another local non-profit, Hickory County Community Wellness Foundation, contributed \$12,000 to the project. Hometown heroes Larry and Susanne Pickering donated \$150,000 for the parking lot and covered driveway. Missouri Foundation for Health kicked in another \$20,000 to help with construction needs.



One of the most exciting additions at the Health Department's complex is a fitness center.

"We provide six daily Silver Sneaker classes, two weekly Yoga classes, a weekly Tai Chi class, and a daily group walking class," says Vader. "Our fitness center is open 24/7 with cardio equipment, and is available for a low monthly membership fee."



Just three months after it opened, the fitness center already has nearly 100 members.



Outside the fitness center and main health department building sits a beautiful children's playground, donated by the Corps of Engineers, and lush landscaping provided by the University of Missouri Extension's Master Gardeners. The complex also boasts an open Farmer's Market building, where about a dozen vendors sell fresh fruits and vegetables and baked goods every Friday afternoon from May through October. The Farmer's Market building includes a commercial kitchen.

"The equipment was purchased with \$36,000 from a USDA Community Facilities grant," explains Vader. "Hickory County Cares also donated cooking equipment."

The kitchen allows the Health Department to offer cooking classes, in partnership with the local University of Missouri Extension. Three times a year, an Extension nutritionist holds a six-week series of classes called Cooking Matters, which target different age groups.

"They teach classes for kids, youth, teens, adults and families," says Vader. "I took it myself. It is a lot of fun!"

Vader explains the instructor makes the recipe during the class, and then sends each participant home with the ingredients they need to make it again for their families. There is no cost to class participants.

In October 2018, the Extension also began teaching the CDC's T2 diabetes prevention course at the Health Department. The program uses regular weight checks, group meetings and accountability to encourage participants to build healthier eating habits. The Health Department has two certified Lifestyle Coaches on staff to provide ongoing support. When participants meet CDC program milestone requirements, the Health Department will begin receiving reimbursements through Medicare.



The health department's new complex also ensures increased ability to provide mass prophylaxis to Hickory County's 9,500 residents during a public health emergency.

"The facility has generator capacity for the entire building to be operated during times of emergency," says Vader, "and our physical layout now offers efficient use of the services that could be provided during a mass prophylaxis scenario."



(L to R) Hickory County Health Department staff Tammy Parker, RN, Dawn Vader and Debbie Smith

Is all this progress enough for Vader? She laughs. She has already submitted another \$153,000 application to NAP. With these funds she hopes to enclose the Farmer's Market and add two more bathrooms. This would allow her to move the fitness classes into the Farmer's Market and place additional exercise equipment in the gym. She has plans to add a children's splash park before summer 2019 with a \$12,000 grant from Missouri Foundation for Health. And, she has her eye on three acres behind the complex.

"That would be a great place to put in soccer fields and an outdoor walking trail," she says with a grin.

What advice would Vader give other local public health agencies with dreams as big as hers?

"Strategically plan your approach to the solution with legal and financial assistance," she says. "Contact your regional planning commission and ask them to come visit your board members to discuss funding opportunities."

With this type of successful strategy, the sky may be the only limit to Vader's efforts to build a healthier Hickory County!

The #HealthierMO initiative is seeking more stories like this one that demonstrate how partners in Missouri's greater public health system are working together to transform the future of public health in our state and offer every resident the opportunity for a healthier life. If you have a story to share, email Communications Coordinator Jaci McReynolds at jmcreynolds@healthiermo.org. Learn more about the initiative and how you can get involved at HealthierMO.org or join the conversation on Facebook @[HealthierMO](https://www.facebook.com/HealthierMO) or Twitter @[aHealthierMO](https://twitter.com/aHealthierMO).