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“Laying the Foundation: Transforming Rural Louisiana Communities into Geaux Zones”

The Geaux Zones initiative, in development by the Louisiana Healthy Communities Coalition (LHCC), hopes to advance healthier living in Louisiana communities by recognizing and supporting local efforts that focus on making healthy decisions the easy ones. The initiative will be piloted in two rural communities, Ringgold and Farmerville. Both communities were chosen based on their consistently poor rankings in various health outcomes. Utilizing data from County Health Rankings, the Food Environmental Atlas, the Environmental Public Health Tracking database, and others, significant health disparities in these communities were identified to address their specific needs. From this assessment, nine potential health indicators were developed, and LHCC selected four critical areas for initial focus: access to healthy foods, opportunities for physical activity, tobacco-free environments, and access to healthcare services. By assessing these communities on these indicators, the Geaux Zones initiative aims to identify gaps in resources, infrastructure, and community engagement that hinder residents from achieving better health outcomes. Through this, LHCC will serve as a liaison to connect these rural communities with resources, partnerships, and funding opportunities to help them develop and implement new health-promoting initiatives, including establishing community gardens, creating safer green spaces for physical activity, promoting tobacco-free environments, and improving access to preventive health services. In addition, LHCC will provide ongoing support and guidance to ensure the sustainability of these efforts, including a newly developed resource and instruction manual for communities to complete their own health profile and asset maps. Ultimately, Geaux Zones will aim to create an environment that encourages healthier behaviors and enhances community well-being by fostering collaboration among local organizations, community members, and stakeholders throughout rural Louisiana.