

Thrive Laurens County Community Listening Session Report

Gray Court, Laurens County,
SC



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Thrive Laurens County

Community Listening Session Report – Gray Court

Date: September 18, 2025

Location: SC Empowerment Centre, Gray Court, SC

Focus: Healthy Eating and Active Living

Overview: Thrive Laurens County Coalition held a community listening session to gather input from residents on improving access to healthy foods, promoting healthier eating habits, and enhancing opportunities for physical activity and active living to improve health outcomes. The shared insights from community members will directly inform the coalition's action plan as part of the Healthy People, Healthy Carolinas five-year initiative to improve health across Laurens County.

Discussion Objectives

1. **Objective 1:** Understand what resources are available to community members for healthy foods and physical activity, identify gaps, and determine how the coalition can support or expand programs, services, and locations to promote healthy foods and physical activity.
2. **Objective 2:** Understand the barriers and other general factors that influence or impact healthy behaviors, such as healthy eating and physical activity/active living.
3. **Objective 3:** Collect ideas and suggestions from participants on creating new opportunities and improving access to healthy foods and physical activity within their community.

Discussion Questions

1. **Access & Availability** – Where do you and your family usually get healthy foods and find places to be active?
2. **Helpful Resources** – What programs, places, or resources have helped your family eat healthier or be more active?
3. **Barriers & Challenges** – What makes it difficult to eat healthy foods or be physically active?
4. **Ideas for the Future** – Imagine a healthier community. What changes or partnerships would make healthy eating and active living easier for everyone?

Seventy-eight community members participated in the Gray Court listening session, representing a diverse mix of ages, backgrounds, and experiences across Laurens County. Participants represented a wide range of zip codes and cities, including Gray Court, Laurens, Clinton, Fountain Inn, Waterloo, and Enoree. Nearly 80% were attending a listening session for the first time.

Access, Availability and Helpful Resources

Healthy Eating/Healthy Food Access

Most Gray Court residents travel out of the town to neighboring areas to access healthy foods. Specific areas mentioned include Fountain Inn, City of Laurens, Woodruff and Simpsonville.

Grocery Stores

- Wal-Mart (Clinton, Woodruff, Laurens)
- Aldi
- Food Lion (Clinton, Woodruff)
- Ingles (Clinton, Laurens)
- Dollar General (Waterloo)
- Publix (Simpsonville)
- Places mentioned out of the county with further distance includes:
 - a. Sam's Club

Farmers' Markets/Roadside Markets

- a. There are roadside markets and stands throughout the community. The roadside stands offer seasonal produce like strawberries, pumpkins, and sweet potatoes.
- Mixon Farm, Highway 101, Gray Court
- Taylor Family Farm, Highway 221, Laurens
- Stewart Farms, Enoree, Laurens County
- **Farmers' Market at Watts Mill** (only open on Saturdays)
 - a. There was great discussion on the farmers' market located in Laurens on the Square. Many session participants did not know about the market or find it too far to access. The market has limited produce, mixed with non-food items.
 - b. The Market Manager is currently working to recruit more certified, local farmers/farms to diversify offerings. The options are limited due to a lack of farmers.

Gardens (Community/Personal)

- A few session participants mentioned having personal gardens (less than 20%).
- No mention of a community garden during the session.
 - a. **Facilitator's Note:** After the session in conversation, one participant mentioned the community garden located at the SC Empowerment Centre.

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	Programs and Services • SC Empowerment Centre (one location in Gray Court and host location of the listening session) identified as a food resource. The Centre is a hub location for the SC FoodShare program for Laurens County, has a food pantry/emergency food supply and provides cooking education classes. • Piedmont Agency on Aging (Senior Center of Laurens) provides the Meals on Wheels service. a. Todd Memorial Presbyterian Church in Laurens is a congregate nutrition site. The congregate nutrition site is open Monday through Friday to individuals 60 or older and reservations are required. • Senior Farmers' Nutrition Voucher program: Session participant mentioned the quantity is limited for the demand and that distribution is inconsistent. • Laurens County Library has a seed library as part of the SC Plants the Seed Program. • Helping Hands Ministries (Woodruff) has a food bank that provides mostly staples and not a lot of fresh fruit every other week. Other • A session participant shared about a family in Southside Laurens that gives veggies and fruit in the community.
<i>Physical Activity/Active Living</i>	Session participants emphasized the need for more safe, affordable, and engaging recreation opportunities, noting limited family options, safety concerns in local parks, and a lack of activities that attract and retain residents. Parks • Little River Park • Gray Court Community Park: Gray Court has a renovated park off Highway 101 with new facilities including ball fields. • The Battle at Musgrove Mill State Park is in Laurens County located on Highway 56, 12-15 miles from Gray Court. The park has 5 miles of trails, fishing opportunities and educational programs. There is a partnership with the library that offers free admission to the park via library passes. ○ Awareness of the state park and the available programming was mixed from the session participants with one noting they were not aware of the park at all. ○ One session participant commented on the distance to the state park from Waterloo being a huge barrier because of limited transportation. Walking Trails • Swamp Rabbit Trail- connects Laurens to Simpsonville. • There is a walking path around the Town Hall in Gray Court. Classes • No fitness or organized physical activity classes were mentioned by session participants.

	Facilities • YMCA in Laurens • Fellowship Camp and Conference Center - Fellowship Camp and Conference Center, a ministry of Camping Ministries of the Carolinas, provides camping, retreat and conference, and environmental education for children, youth and adults. • Lake Rabon (near city of Laurens) is a public park that has boating, fishing, picnic shelters and a playground for youth. Other • Many session participants shared utilizing their neighborhood for physical activity such as walking. • The “workplace” was also shared as a place to receive physical activity. • The Activity Center of Simpsonville was mentioned as an option for recreation and physical activity. The Simpsonville Activity and Senior Center is operated by the Simpsonville Parks and Recreation. • Big Air Trampoline Park is a recreational option but considered expensive by some.
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Barriers and Challenges

<i>Healthy Eating/Healthy Foods Access</i>	Session participants noted that most available services and programs are concentrated in the City of Laurens, requiring reliable transportation to access. Key barriers included: • High cost of healthy foods and limited affordable options. • Distance to the Farmers’ Market is particularly challenging for Waterloo residents. • Limited education and resources on healthy meal preparation. • Gaps in food assistance for seniors who fall just above income eligibility for programs. • Short shelf life of fresh produce, making it difficult to sustain healthy eating habits. • Limited availability of healthy foods in Gray Court due to no dedicated grocery store or other retail option.
<i>Physical Activity/Active Living</i>	Session participants identified several challenges that make it difficult for community members to stay active or use existing recreation spaces. • Cost keeps many families from joining sports or recreation programs. • Transportation is a challenge, and many activities are located outside of Gray Court. • Limited options. There aren’t enough organized sports or indoor places to be active as seasons change, and it gets darker earlier. • Limited Awareness. Many residents are unaware of current programs, or recreation resources that are available.

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- Lack of Infrastructure. No sidewalks in neighborhoods outside of city limits or bike lanes.
- Safety while walking and participating in physical activity are a concern for some community members. Many session participants stated feeling uncomfortable using available parks alone.
 - Gary Court does not have a leash law. This is of importance to some community members for walking in the neighborhoods for physical activity.
- Limited street lighting also mentioned as a safety concern especially in the fall and winter months.
- Busy lives. Work, family, and daily responsibilities make it hard to stay active.

Ideas for the Future

Imagine a healthier community. What changes or partnerships would make healthy eating and active living easier for everyone?

Locations

The community would love to see more available locations for accessing healthy foods and activities in Gray Court.

- More community gardens
- Operate a van going around to deliver food a couple times per week.
- Expansion of FoodShare SC- more locations within Laurens as well as delivery mechanism.
- A grocery store specifically in Gray Court.
- Establish an activity center in Gray Court within an existing facility (a church, school or county building).

Education and Programming

- Offer cooking classes specifically on how to use “new and strange” fruits and vegetables.
- Combine budgeting, food shopping and cooking education.
- Provide education on the “diet of healthy foods.”
 - **Context:** A community member recommended community education that focused more on whole healthy meals, the contents of healthy meals and how to have a balanced diet.
- Provide education on growing foods in raised beds/raised beds gardening. Develop a special class for seniors to grow their own veggies and fruits at home.
- Develop “Stories on the Go/Storybook Trail” into existing walking trails to make them more engaging for all ages. The new park on Highway 101 was specifically mentioned as a place for this initiative.
- Develop a sports/recreation game promoting and focusing on physical activity for youth.
- Develop community events that are “active” and integrate physical activity.

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Partnerships/Funding

- County support for the FoodShare program to make the program more mobile with a delivery option, like a mobile meals concept.
- Partner with churches to establish food markets, food banks as well as support groups for healthier living. Churches can also be places to mobilize volunteer networks for local healthy food initiatives.

Information Access – a central, coordinated place and way to receive information about programs, events and services; not solely reliant on digital.

- Develop a list of farms, farmers' markets, mobile markets to distribute to the community.
- Electronic signs for calendar events in front of the town hall.
- Develop a community directory/central communication hub that houses information, events and contact information for programs and resources.
- Develop a campaign or initiative specifically that supports or assists people being physically active at work.

Community and Family Support

- Create more opportunities and programming that support the whole family (youth – seniors).
- Provide more community engagement opportunities for conversations, fellowship and follow-up around healthy eating and active living. Preventive measures for chronic disease can be integrated into these conversations.
- Equip local facilities and champions to serve and provide more programs. Session participants specifically mentioned the SC Empowerment Centre.
- For existing programs, services and facilities, increase availability after work hours by keeping places open later.
- Offer health coaching to educate on alternative health treatments, stress management, and trauma-based care.

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Other Discussion Points/Insights:

- Gray Court is considered a food desert. Many session participants are aware of this fact.
- The overwhelming theme was that residents must travel outside of Gray Court and often outside of Laurens County to access both healthy foods and recreational opportunities, creating significant barriers for those without reliable transportation.
- Many of the available parks and recreation facilities are not located near Gray Court. Current programs and resources are in one central area, “On the Square” in Laurens.
- Waterloo was mentioned several times as an area lacking access to healthy eating and active living resources due to distance.
- Many community members were unaware of the state park in Laurens, its amenities, and the available activities.
- Place-based activities in existing resources were mentioned several times for physical activity. This included implementing Storybook Trails, Healthy Food and Nutrition Tips and Education in visible areas where people already frequent.

Notable Quotes:

"Biggest problem is there's no way to communicate to the citizens in Laurens County about the programs that are available."

"Laurens County is huge and unless you live near the square, you have to travel forever to get to anything"

"We go to the other side of Laurens to get food."

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Participant Profile

Upon arrival to the listening session, community members were asked to complete a demographic survey. Below are the results.

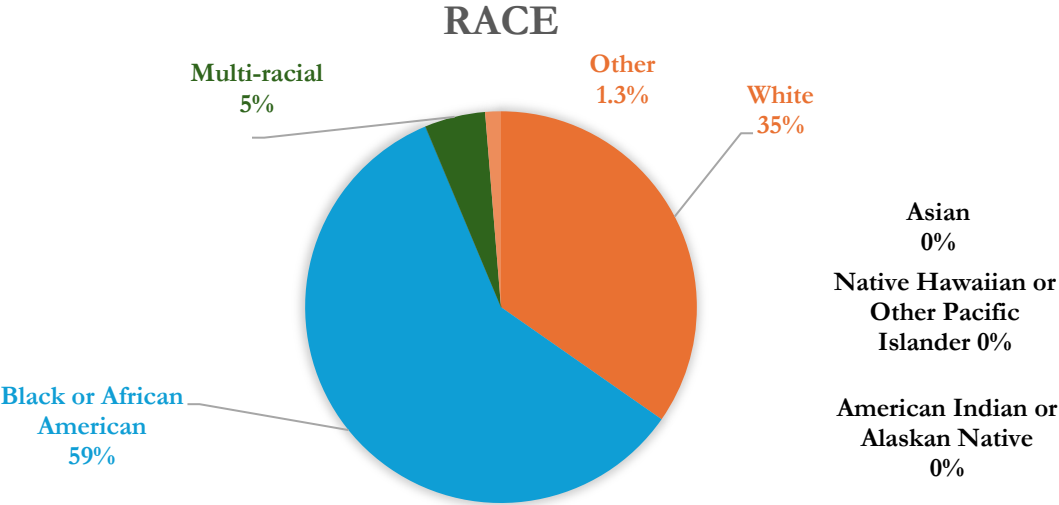
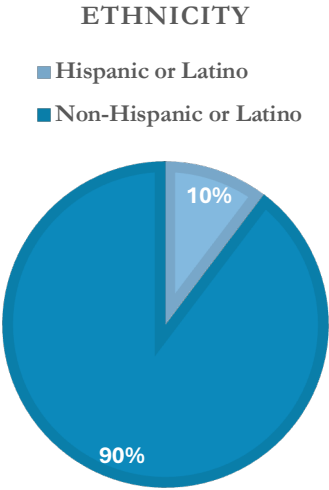
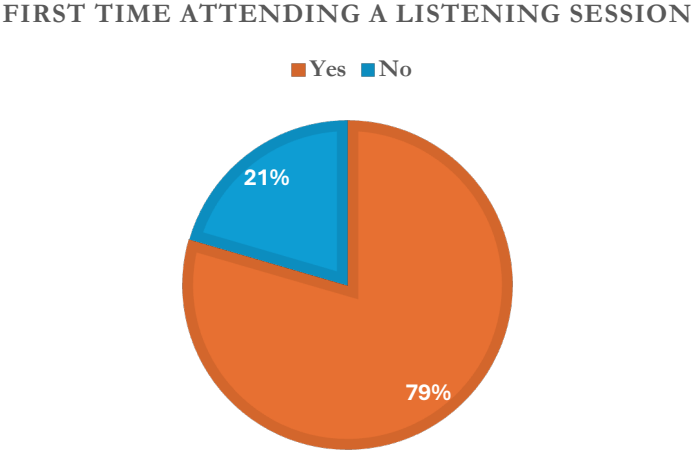
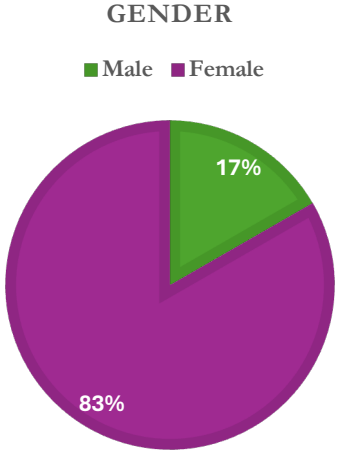
Total Responses: 78
Age Range: 0–94 years
Median Age: 50 years

Participants represented a range of cities and zip codes across Laurens County and nearby areas, including:

Cities: Clinton, Laurens, Gray Court, Fountain Inn, Enoree, Waterloo, Greenville, and Greer.
Zip Codes: 28645, 29260, 29325, 29326, 29335, 29360, 29360, 29369, 29384, 29601, 29604, 29607, 29644, 29645, 29645, 29649, 29651.

Reported Health Conditions: The survey included a question asking respondents about their current health conditions.

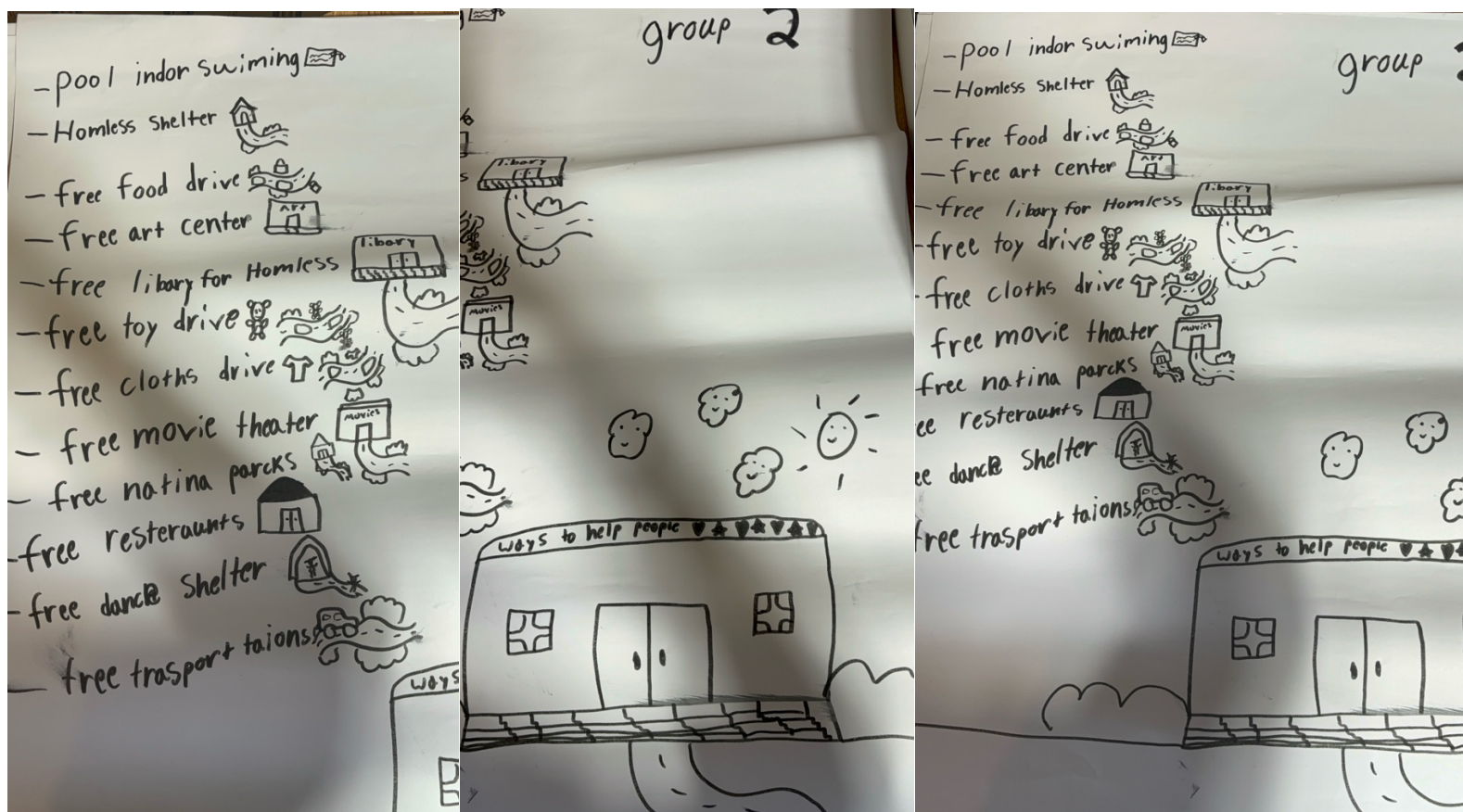
Condition	# of Mentions
Blood Pressure	25
Diabetes	23
Arthritis	17
Cancer	5
Stroke	2
Heart Disease	1



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The following artwork was created by one of the younger participants during the listening session, capturing how the next generation envisions a healthier, more active Gray Court community.



End Report