Mapping Assets to Improve Community Health
by Nikki Keene-Woods

I teach a community health course to undergraduate students in the Health Sciences Department at Wichita State University. As part of their service learning project, they will create an asset map by using a Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping system. GIS is a sophisticated computer based system that stores and captures information based on the earth's geographic location. This will help them to identify the positive attributes of a community by manipulating the layers in the GIS. Community asset mapping or the creation of a map of what is valuable in a community is a powerful tool in assessing community needs and addressing health disparities by helping us to understand our strengths and opportunities. The maps will be used to better understand the multifaceted effects of personal and environmental factors that determine behaviors and identify behavioral and organizational leverage points for health promotion.

Students are working with the GIS Department at Sedgwick County, Kansas, Health Department (SCHD) and once the asset map is created, SCHD can create state-of-the-community briefing reports and message maps that can be tailored depending on the community's needs. The project helped our community look at disparities through a positive lens, what neighborhoods have access to community assets and how can this be replicated in other areas. The actual graphic is a powerful tool and can communicate the story of our large urban community in an efficient method. It has also been a great opportunity for students to be on the ground examining health disparities and brainstorming solutions from a neighborhood level.

A community asset is anything that can be used to improve the quality of community life. For this project, the students focused on physical community assets, which include informal and formal institutions such as social groups; recreation programs; churches. It also includes businesses that create local job opportunities, social service agencies, health services (hospitals and clinics), libraries, schools (both for children and adults) and colleges or universities.

A few students are assigned a part of Wichita to assess physical community assets and provided with an electronic map that contains the districts/sections of the area and includes street names. They conduct a Google/online search of their area for the numerous community assets and record the addresses into a "Community Asset Map Template" Excel spreadsheet. Next they survey the community and update each asset's name and address and provide a short description. Through this process, the students end up with a fairly sophisticated database.

Once the students gather the data, they classify them according to the type of assets, such as employment agencies or churches. The data is shared with SCHD to create a GIS map that can be manipulated into several layers by color-coding entries according to asset type. So, if you want employment agencies to be included in one view and not another, you can isolate them in different views by manipulating them through the digital

system. As a result of this project, students have discovered communities in which assets were not distributed evenly; for example, certain areas have healthcare information deserts or a lack of health care services.

The next steps can be as big as you want them to be. The potential uses include the following: program planning, replication of local success stories, advocating for equal access to community assets across the community, and for use with conversations with local policy makers. In this case, the SCHD will include the assets map in its Community Health Assessment, which is disseminated to a large number of stakeholders, including community health workers and local agencies. What will result from the project is an agreement between Wichita State and the SCHD, maybe even a memorandum of understanding for a student project in the future. Funders working on community development can use the data to help inform future calls for proposals.

What is great about this project is that you don't need specialized skills to create an asset map and it can be replicated through partnerships with local health departments that have access to GIS mapping technology. The data can then be analyzed to reveal relationships and patterns in your community and to improve health equity by identifying the positive attributes in one area that can be replicated in other areas with a deficit.