Who knew the Grange could be categorized as a Public Health Organization?

For Lilly Anderson, an Oregon State University master’s in public health graduate, the correlation was a no brainer.

“Why don’t we use the Grange?” Anderson, who is not a Grange member, questioned when beginning research for an Oregon State University peer reviewed study she co-authored that was recently published in the Journal of Community Health. She had driven past a Grange building in Oregon every morning and took her curiosity about the organization and turned it into the topic of her study.

The study reviewed scientific literature that mentioned the Grange, in both medical and agricultural publications. Researchers also pored over the Grange’s own materials to assess the organization’s key messages for the past two decades. The result of the research found a strong case to be made for the Grange to play an active role in the health and quality of life of those who live in Grange communities.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “Public health refers to all organized measures (whether public or private) to prevent disease, promote health, and prolong life among the population as a whole.”

The basis of the study consisted of using five categories that the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (ODPHP) defined as vital to health in their Healthy People 2020 initiative and finding examples throughout the last 20 years where the Grange ran programs to help their communities in these areas. The five categories are classified as healthcare and access to healthcare services, social and community contact, education, economic stability, and neighborhood and the built environment.

The data found was overwhelmingly supportive of the positive impact the Grange has had on the general health of their members and communities. Now more than ever, public health is incredibly relevant to Grange members according to Oregon State president Susan Noah and co-author of the paper.

“Everyone is becoming more and more conscious of what it means to be a healthy society, especially as it relates to food and agriculture,” she said.

While individual Granges have different areas of focus, many have physical buildings equipped with kitchens and classroom space, which has allowed them to partner on several health initiatives, including blood drives, mental health awareness classes and Alzheimer’s caretaker education programs. In Philomath, the Marys River Grange has hosted a low-cost medical clinic for farm workers.

Now, researchers and Grange leaders hope the new findings will spur greater collaboration with health care providers, especially as communities start to reopen from COVID-19 shutdowns.

“These days when we look at public health it is not just referring to immunizations and things like that,” Anderson said. “We are looking at what we call the social determinants of health.”

From local Granges running diabetes information classes, teaching people to make masks to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, working with local food banks, planting trees, creating and refurbishing playgrounds, and clearing walking trails, the direct impact the Grange has on their community is great.

On the national level, policy work including anti-bullying advocacy, lobbying and advocacy for the Lifeline program and telehealth, campaigns to create programs to reduce social isolation, and pollinator programs have had nationwide impact.

“We saw a very strong presence in all five categories, both state and national,” Anderson said. “We are looking at a more holistic, whole person view of health than we might have thought in previous years when we were only concerned with your doctor’s checkup and your weight.”
As with most fraternal organizations, the Grange's membership is aging, but it is working to adapt and bring in new people, Noah said. While members are not required to be actively involved in agriculture, many Granges are now focusing on sustainable practices, growing food and eating local. Some have even begun offering yoga and jazzercise classes.

“It’s this overlooked source that’s been there this whole time. They’ve been in the community for more than a hundred years,” said Veronica Irvin, assistant professor in OSU’s College of Public Health and Human Sciences and one of the authors of the paper. “They have community support, they have physical space, they have similar missions to public health — it’s this natural partner that we’ve just not met up with.”

Moving forward, the question remains, where does the Grange go from here?

“It’s a great way for Granges to talk about their relevance,” said Amanda Brozana-Rios, National Grange Communication and Development Director, when referring to the events and activities the Grange puts on.

As the disparity between rural health access compared to more urban areas grows, now more than ever, the Grange could make even more of a plausible impact. That impact, though, is contingent on the members of the organization.

“It is just a matter of getting our Granges to recognize that they can be a real force in the community for healthcare purposes in such a variety of ways,” Noah said.

Marketing and community engagement, both locally and nationally, will also play a key role moving forward.

“Granges are so unique to their own geographical areas,” Anderson said. “If we can take the different programs that are already in practice at the Granges and let everybody know about them, we can see them start to blossom out.”

Regardless of the challenges that may arise as the Grange steps into this new chapter, the core of the organization will remain the same.

“So much of what we do is just reaching out to people,” Noah said. “It’s just part of the ingrained awareness of rural life: being a benefit to each other and to trying to help each other. That is so much of what the Grange has always been about that you don’t think of the fact that it can contribute to a healthy way of life.”

Labelled as the “best kept secret” by Anderson, the study concluded that the Grange, even though it is unknown in many areas of the country, holds the potential to make lasting positive changes on overall public health of both members and their local communities.

“The Grange has been contributing towards rural health for over 150 years, but despite this predisposition to the mission of public health, the Grange remains an underused community resource capable of improving rural health and addressing a variety of rural public health issues,” the study read.