



American Heart Association

TAKING ACTION TO PREVENT OBESITY



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



2015 PROGRESS REPORT
VOICES FOR HEALTHY KIDS

TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES CHANGING LIVES



2015 PROGRESS REPORT LETTER FROM NANCY BROWN

Two years ago, Voices for Healthy Kids embarked on a mission. Faced with the knowledge that nearly one in three children in the United States are overweight or obese, we, like others, recognized that immediate action was needed. But we knew the challenges to reversing these troubling statistics would be enormous. The root causes of overweight and obesity — unhealthy eating and a lack of physical activity — have become nearly institutional for several generations.

VOICES FOR HEALTHY KIDS FUNDED PROJECTS HAVE BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN THE PASSAGE OF 14 STATE OR LOCAL POLICIES, WITH THE POTENTIAL TO IMPACT THE LIVES OF NEARLY 36 MILLION AMERICANS IN JUST THE MOST RECENT YEAR OF OUR EFFORT

As difficult as these challenges are, we nonetheless had hope. That hope was rooted in the belief that public and private institutions across the nation shared our belief in the urgency of this public-health crisis. Thus was born our operating model — to engage, organize and mobilize people in communities throughout the United States to help make the healthy choice the easy choice in the places where children live, learn and play.

Over the past two years, Voices for Healthy Kids has funded over 50 campaigns in 26 states, and assisted in providing technical assistance and other support for over 100 more campaigns. Our support has helped to open once shuttered playgrounds and basketball courts to community members; helped to eliminate unhealthy snacks, vending machine offerings and junk-food fundraising and marketing in schools; helped make it safer for kids to walk and bike to school; helped eliminate sugar-sweetened beverage offerings in daycare centers; and helped bring healthy fresh fruits

and vegetables to the nation's food deserts. Equally important, each of these examples is being replicated elsewhere as knowledge spreads that the obesity and overweight epidemic among children can be overcome.

The results thus far? In our second year alone, projects funded by Voices for Healthy Kids have been instrumental in the passage of 14 state or local policies, with the potential to impact the lives of nearly 36 million Americans. Even more significant, many of these successes have happened in areas where more than 30% of residents live in lower-income communities or communities of color.

The following pages detail many key highlights from the second year of Voices for Healthy Kids. Each and every one of these efforts has played an important role in our progress so far, and give us powerful momentum as we continue our work to help our future.



NANCY BROWN, CEO, AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION



INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

A couple of generations ago, Americans walked and biked throughout their communities. Daily physical activity was the norm, not the exception. But then something changed. Americans became automobile-centric, and opportunities for safe, daily physical activity became challenging, especially for children and youth. Routes to schools became unsafe. Schools locked their playgrounds and athletic fields.

Today, we are all paying for the cost of this lifestyle in health and healthcare dollars. Voices for Healthy Kids is working to make daily physical activity the norm once again by increasing opportunities for families and children to safely walk and bike to school, and to play safely on playgrounds and athletic fields in their communities. Making it possible for kids to incorporate

an hour of physical activity into their daily lives and helping to put them on a path to a lifetime of good health.

OPENING SCHOOL GROUNDS TO OHIO COMMUNITIES

Fear of legal liability forced many school administrators throughout Ohio to shutter their school grounds to the community and even to their students after school and on weekends. For communities throughout Ohio, and especially smaller towns that lacked fitness centers, this created a huge void in terms of opportunities for recreation and physical activity.

Health advocates in Ohio, led by the American Heart Association, decided to create and implement a campaign designed to give school administrators the liability protections they needed, thereby providing them with the ability to open school playgrounds, basketball courts, tracks and other fitness facilities to the local community.

But to be successful, they had to show community members and policy makers alike why it was important to change school liability laws. To accomplish that, they

Cresha Auck Foley, the American Heart Association's government relations director in Ohio, said the change in law brings a two-tiered benefit to Ohio. "For the urban core, and especially for communities of need, it creates a safe place for kids and families to go. Also, since a third of Ohio is in rural, lower-income Appalachia, shared use presents a unique opportunity to create community-based fitness centers."

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance and funding*

DID YOU KNOW?

AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND LATINO CHILDREN ARE LESS LIKELY TO PLAY SPORTS OR PARTICIPATE IN THE RECOMMENDED 60 MINUTES OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PER DAY, EITHER IN SCHOOL OR AFTER SCHOOL. THROUGH PREVENTOBESITY.NET, NEARLY 35,000 ADVOCATES TOOK ACTION TO INCREASE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THEIR COMMUNITIES IN YEAR TWO.

designed an aggressive campaign using photographs to show images of closed schools and the groups that could potentially benefit from their opening and use.

The campaign included fact sheets that were provided to legislators, a website, a video and a social-media campaign. It took hold, in part, because it not only helped to illustrate the problem, but it supported the belief of many legislators that because taxpayers help to fund schools, they should be given the opportunity to use the grounds of those facilities.

Legislation to provide liability protections to schools moved quickly in 2014, passing both the Ohio House of Representatives and Senate, and was signed into law by Ohio Governor John Kasich in December.

MAKING IT SAFER FOR KIDS TO WALK AND BIKE TO SCHOOL IN MINNESOTA

Fewer kids walk and bike to school now than at any time in the nation's history, due primarily to safety concerns and distances from schools. Not only has that had a negative impact on the long-term health of students and their ability to develop lifelong, healthy habits, but it also means that they are less prepared for a day of learning.

Health and school advocates in Minnesota set out to change this trend by creating a Safe Routes to School (SRTS) funding program in that state to help make up for existing shortfalls in funding from the federal program.



SRTS helps communities make it safer for students to walk and bike to school by providing dollars for planning and infrastructure improvements such as safer street crossings and bike trails. The program is so popular in Minnesota that yearly funding requests have outstripped available federal dollars by as much as 5 to 1.

Knowing they faced an uphill battle due to competing funding interests and a significant state budget shortfall, the advocates created a powerful, broad-based coalition. The coalition included nearly 40 organizations, ranging from health groups to bicycle coalitions to school organizations.

The coalition proved to be a strong voice and a powerful presence, and as a result, in 2012 the Minnesota Legislature established a state-based SRTS program, but did not fund it due to the state budget shortfall. The coalition returned in 2013, backing legislation to fund the program, and with bipartisan support the Legislature provided \$500,000 over two

years for non-infrastructure SRTS needs, such as planning, mapping and training.

The coalition returned to the legislation in 2014 to secure even more funding, and was successful in obtaining \$1 million annually for SRTS infrastructure funding, and an increase of \$250,000 per year for non-infrastructure spending.

“The dollars approved for the program will potentially improve the safety of tens of thousands of Minnesota school students, including many from the state’s African-American and Latino communities,” says Rachel Callanan, regional vice president of advocacy for Minnesota and Wisconsin at the American Heart Association.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance and funding*

LINKING COMMUNITIES TO SCHOOL RECREATIONAL FACILITIES IN ARIZONA

One of the areas hardest hit by the obesity epidemic is inner-city, economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, many of which have obesity rates, and obesity-associated health problems, that far exceed those in other communities. A key challenge facing these inner-city communities is that one of the answers to this health crisis — increased physical activity — is often difficult to implement on a broad scale due to a lack of available infrastructure designed for recreational activities.

Recognizing this challenge, health advocates in Arizona saw an opportunity to unlock a hidden recreational gem in the middle of many of these communities — public schools and their playgrounds, gymnasiums and practice fields. Similar to many schools throughout America, Arizona schools shuttered these recreational opportunities on nights, weekends and during the summer due to concerns over liability.

“Within nearly every town or city, a school tends to be the center of the community. It is a safe place for kids to play, and if there are places for children to play, they tend to be more physically active,” says Nicole Olmstead, government relations director for the American Heart Association in Arizona.

In 2012, the health advocates began working in the State Legislature to create the tools to protect schools that want to share their recreation facilities with community members. They added language into the statute that would essentially make school grounds a

public park when school was not in session. The change was well received, but many school officials felt it did not go far enough to protect them from potential lawsuits. So the health groups returned to the Legislature in 2014 and were successful in securing passage of legislation that would provide greater liability protections for schools. And while the original legislation applied only to the grounds of a school, the new measure extends liability protection to inside use, such as gymnasiums.

Recognizing that shared use is only one piece in the effort to untangle the obesity puzzle, Arizona health advocates are now working on efforts to complement their success including Safe Routes to School, improved school nutrition and increased opportunities for in-school physical activity.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance and strategic direction*





OUR IMPACT:
MORE THAN 29 MILLION PEOPLE LIVE IN STATES THAT ARE INCREASING ACCESS TO SAFE PLACES TO BE ACTIVE.

BUILDING A COALITION TO SUPPORT SHARED USE IN IOWA

Health advocates in Iowa noticed that something was missing from some of the beautiful, expansive playgrounds that had recently been built in that state. It wasn't a slide, or climbing bars — it was kids. Locked up behind chain-link fences, the playgrounds were off limits after school hours and during the summer due to liability fears.

That ironic picture — a playground without kids, even as obesity rates among youth in Iowa soared — was the spark that created an Iowa coalition whose mission to change the liability laws as they pertain to school recreational facilities such as playgrounds, tracks and fields. Including more than 25 health and school-based organizations, they became known as the "Healthier Iowa Coalition."

Seeing the importance of changing the law to both benefit the health of kids and provide taxpayers with access to one of their community investments, a bipartisan group of Iowa legislators introduced legislation known as the "Community Use Bill."

It clarified liability protections for schools and communities that want to open their facilities for public use.

Encouraged by the coalition, the measure passed both the Iowa House of Representatives and the Senate. The governor held a formal signing of the bill in April, making it law.

"Our schools are public, and we encourage community use of our facilities ... Working together in our schools helps us develop shared understanding and makes better use of the huge investment our communities have made in our facilities," says Dr. Thomas Ahart, superintendent of the Des Moines Public Schools, in support of the law change.

The Healthier Iowa Coalition is now changing their focus to secure funding for the Safe Routes to School project, which will encourage Iowa children to more frequently walk and bike to school.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance, funding, and strategic direction*

APPROVING SHARED USE PROTECTIONS IN WEST VIRGINIA

It has long been known that schools, including those in rural areas, have the ability to play a unique role in improving the health and fitness of community members. Not only do they create opportunities for students to stay fit and active throughout the day through physical education, recess and athletics, they are a huge, potential resource for older community members as well who do not have easy access to fitness centers.

However, health advocates in West Virginia found, as have advocates in other states, that for schools the liability risk of someone being hurt on school property far outweighed the benefits of opening the buildings and grounds to the community. That reality was especially troubling when coupled with the fact that West Virginia has the second highest adult obesity rate in the nation, right after Mississippi.

Working with health champions in the legislature, advocates—including the American Heart Association, the West Virginia Department of Education, the West Virginia Education Association and the American Teachers Federation—saw legislation introduced that provided liability protections for schools that made available their recreational facilities after school hours for community members or local organizations.

To support the effort, the advocates prepared a citizen-shared-use toolkit to help educate the public and decision makers alike on the benefits of changing the law. The hard work paid off. In an era

when it seems as though the political challenges of getting anything done are insurmountable, the bill unanimously passed the West Virginia Legislature with support from all 134 members.

To add icing to the victory cake, passage of the law was highlighted at a ribbon cutting at a formerly gated elementary-school playground in Charleston. West Virginia State Senator and physician Ron Stollings, who attended the ribbon cutting, called the new law a step forward in the effort to fight the “epidemic of physical inactivity in West Virginia.”

Voices for Healthy Kids contribution: Technical assistance



BUILDING A COALITION IN WASHINGTON STATE TO SUPPORT SAFER ROUTES TO SCHOOL

Washington State has long recognized the need to get more kids walking and biking to school. But the challenge was getting sustainable dollars dedicated to the infrastructure that would make it easier and safer for students to do that.

That challenge spurred advocates in Washington to organize a movement known as the Safe Routes Healthy Kids Campaign. It was designed to urge policymakers to support and approve funding for better community infrastructure, such as safer crosswalks, sidewalks and bike routes.

Led by the Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition (COPC), American Heart Association and Washington Bikes, the advocates helped get thousands of state residents engaged in educating legislators and the governor about the importance of safer routes to school and the long term benefits of Safe Routes infrastructure to the health of the state.

“When children can safely walk or bike a mile to school, they can meet two-thirds of the daily recommended amount of exercise. Increased physical activity helps children achieve a healthy weight and cardiovascular fitness, as well as improved academic performance,” wrote Jennifer Trott of the COPC in a blog to coalition members and supporters.

To help support the effort, the COPC commissioned a poll that showed strong support among Washington State voters for Safe Routes funding. The statewide poll found that 84% of voters believe that funding to keep

children safe from traffic and physically active should be an integral part of transportation spending in the state.

In spite of legislative and political wrangling that occurred over broader transportation funding issues, the coalition was ultimately able to secure \$6.75 million in new state funding and \$4.3 million in re-appropriated state funding for Safe Routes, and an additional \$15.3 million in pedestrian and bicycle appropriations.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance and funding*

DID YOU KNOW?

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY BRINGS LOTS OF POSITIVE HEALTH BENEFITS, INCLUDING IMPROVED PHYSICAL FITNESS, MUSCLE ENDURANCE, AEROBIC (LUNG) CAPACITY AND MENTAL HEALTH, INCLUDING MOOD AND COGNITIVE FUNCTION.





IMPROVING THE NUTRITIONAL QUALITY OF SNACK FOODS AND BEVERAGES IN SCHOOLS

Children spend more time at school than any other place outside of the home, and many kids can get up to half of their daily calories at school. So creating a healthier school environment is critical. Voices for Healthy Kids is working to improve the nutritional quality of snack foods and beverages in schools.

Helping children create healthy eating habits at an early age - so their diets include a variety of fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and fewer unhealthy fats and sugars--will help them build a foundation for a lifetime of good health. That, in turn, helps to reduce rates of obesity and overweight, and the resulting health problems such as Type 2 diabetes and heart disease. And providing healthy snack foods and

beverages to children, especially in schools, has an added benefit — youth who eat healthy are better learners.

ESTABLISHING HEALTHY SCHOOL SNACK POLICIES IN NEVADA

Health and education advocates in Nevada are taking federal regulations, which require foods and drinks sold in school vending machines and a la carte lines to be healthier, a step further in their effort to strengthen the eating habits and health of that state's students.

Under a newly approved state policy, not only must all items sold to Nevada students in school during the school day meet the federal nutrition standards, but all food marketing in the schools must also be consistent with the standard. That means no posters, coupons or fundraising efforts promoting unhealthy beverages, candy, or high-fat pizza can appear in the schools.

“We worked to create a policy that not only helped schools meet the new federal standards, it took it one step further to not allow junk-food marketing,” says Ben Schmauss, the American Heart Association’s government relations director in Nevada.

Eliminating access to and the marketing of junk foods in school helps ensure that students won’t be bombarded with incentives for unhealthy products, thus undoing federal efforts to create healthy-food environments in the schools. In addition, consistent, healthier messaging throughout the school day is important for all children and is particularly crucial for those who live in lower socio-economic neighborhoods with greater frequency of junk-food marketing.

Thus far, Nevada health advocates have heard many positive anecdotes of parents who are happy with the new standard because it supports what they’re doing to provide healthy foods at home and educate their children on the importance of good nutrition. Ultimately, the policy will have an impact on the health of students and promote healthier behaviors — behaviors they will carry with them for life.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance*

MAKING THE SCHOOL DAY HEALTHIER IN NEW MEXICO

Children and youth can receive up to 50 percent of their daily calories at school, and for some kids, the only reliable meals they have are in school.

With those facts in mind, education and health advocates in New Mexico have adopted a state rule fully aligning that state’s school snack policies with the federal government’s new nutrition guidelines. The result is that students in New Mexico now have access to snacks during the school day that are primarily whole grains, fruit, vegetable, dairy or a protein.





OUR IMPACT:

OVER 4.5 MILLION STUDENTS IN NEVADA, FLORIDA, UTAH, OREGON, AND NEW MEXICO, 2.5 MILLION OF WHOM ARE ELIGIBLE FOR FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE LUNCH, NOW WILL HAVE HEALTHIER SNACKS IN SCHOOLS. THROUGH PREVENTOBESITY.NET, OUR ADVOCATES SUPPORTED HEALTHIER FOODS IN SCHOOLS WITH 25,487 LETTERS TO DECISION MAKERS.

The new standards will ensure that only foods and beverages which meet the federal nutrition guidelines will be sold to students during the school day.

The new policy also puts in place strict requirements related to fundraising through the use of food. Any fundraiser that does not follow the new restrictions may only be held one time per semester or trimester and only at the discretion of the principal or charter school director.

The policy is designed to not only provide students with healthy foods during the school day, and thus help to strengthen their physical and educational health, but also to create healthy eating habits that they will carry with them for a lifetime.

When one considers the vast array of unhealthy snacks that Americans are confronted with on a daily basis —

one study found that the average American gets 27 percent of his or her total daily energy from junk foods — the new policy is not only good for students, but an investment in the future health of the nation.

To help ensure the new policy is implemented smoothly, the New Mexico Public Education Department is working directly with schools to help implement the new standards.

***Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance***

WORKING TO END THE JUNK-FOOD MARKETING IRONY IN OREGON

What kind of message does it send to students when schools have worked to improve the nutritional content of meals and snacks, but the marketing of junk food is still allowed during the school day? The irony posed by that question caused Upstream Public Health in Oregon to embark on a campaign to limit the marketing of those foods in schools.

Upstream is a 12-year old, health-policy-advocacy organization that successfully pushed for legislation in 2007 banning junk-food sales in schools. That success was later modeled by the federal government in its Smart Snacks in School regulation. But in Oregon and elsewhere, many schools still allow their vending machines to be wrapped in the logos of the major soda brands, and coupons for pizza are often given away as rewards to students for reading well, a food-marketing program thinly veiled as a reading program.

Upstream began implementing a legislative campaign in 2014 designed to educate the public, lawmakers and parents about the contradictions of junk food marketing in schools. Although they weren't successful in getting a law passed to protect students from that marketing during the school day, the advocates see it as year one in a multi-year effort.

"We will be successful in the long run because it is obvious that we should not be marketing those foods to kids during the school day," says Kasandra Griffin, a policy manager at Upstream.

To help in that effort, Upstream will release a back-to-school-food report card this fall that will highlight examples of good leadership on healthy school foods, as well as examples where improvement needs to be made. Junk food marketing will be a highlight of the "needs improvement category" along with issues like the need for improved access to drinking water during the school day.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance and funding*





INCREASING ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HEALTHY FOODS.

The United States produces an abundant amount and variety of fresh, healthy food. But too many residents are unable to access this essential resource.

Where someone lives, what their income level is, and their access to transportation dictate the quantity and quality of food available to them, and ultimately their health and their family's health. Voices for Healthy Kids is dedicated to improving access to affordable healthy foods for all children and families by increasing the number of healthy food outlets, such as grocery stores and corner stores, in underserved communities.

We are doing so by supporting state- and community-based projects to increase federal, state and local support for healthy-food-financing initiatives.

TAKING GROCERY STORE ACCESS TO THE TEXAS CAPITOL

Texas has the lowest number of grocery stores per capita in the United States. The result is that more than 3.4 million Texans do not have easy access to retail sources of fresh fruits and vegetables in their communities, critically important tools in the effort to combat childhood obesity and improve health.



PROXIMITY TO NEIGHBORHOOD SUPERMARKETS IS ASSOCIATED WITH HEALTHIER LIVING AND LOWER BODY WEIGHT

Recognizing that fact, Texas health advocates at the American Heart Association brought grassroots volunteers from throughout the state to Austin, the capital, for a day in March to meet with state lawmakers on the need for better grocery access in that state.

Wearing T-shirts emblazoned with “Closer to My Grocer,” the advocates educated legislators and their staffs about the Texas Grocery Access Investment Act. The measure would create a program to provide grants and loans to retailers to open new grocery stores, or renovate or expand existing stores, in underserved areas.

Among the youth advocates were culinary arts students from Fort Worth who are learning to cook healthy foods at school, but have difficulty finding the ingredients in their neighborhoods, due to a lack of grocery stores.

“The kids all wanted to share their stories, and the legislators and their staff really listened. One Dallas legislator was very impressed — so impressed that he ended up pledging to support the measure although he had been undecided before,” says Victoria Nelson, grassroots director with Voices for Healthy Kids at the American Heart Association in Texas.

Nelson says that the day was very effective because of the real stories the volunteers brought to the capitol. “Our advocacy staff can talk to legislators, but it does not have near the impact as when volunteers and constituents do so,” she says.

Voices for Healthy Kids contribution: Technical assistance and funding

WORKING TO CREATE A HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS FUND IN ALABAMA

More than one million Alabamians — including a half-million children — live in areas without easy access to fresh and healthy food, due to a lack of grocery stores. That places Alabama in the top ten states in the nation, in terms of a lack of access to healthy foods.

But a group of health advocates, under the leadership of Voices for Alabama’s Children (VFAC), is working to change those statistics by creating a healthy foods access fund. The state-based program would establish a revolving-loan program that would provide financial incentives to grocers and other food retailers, to locate in communities that have low or no access to healthy foods.

“Alabamians deserve access to healthy, affordable foods wherever they live. Healthy food financing can make the difference,” wrote Melanie R. Bridgeforth, executive director of VFAC, in a guest editorial.

The fund would not only increase access to healthy foods, and thereby help to improve health, but would also create jobs and boost local economies, building on the more than 15,000 jobs and \$460 million in wages already created by independent grocers in that state.

LAUNCHING A HEALTHY CORNER STORE PROGRAM IN DALLAS

Similar to other urban centers, full-service-grocery stores have become a thing of the past in many locations throughout Dallas. That means many in the city lack access to healthy foods, especially fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains. Today, 49 percent of children residing in Dallas County are overweight or obese.

DID YOU KNOW?

THERE ARE MORE CORNER STORES IN LOW-INCOME AND HIGH-MINORITY URBAN COMMUNITIES, AND FOOD PURCHASES FROM THESE STORES MAY CONTRIBUTE TO HIGHER ENERGY INTAKE AND CONSUMPTION OF LESS HEALTHY FOODS AND BEVERAGES BY URBAN SCHOOL CHILDREN.

To help the public and decision makers understand the importance of establishing such a fund, VFAC is engaged in a statewide campaign that includes grassroots visits to the capital, a walking tour of underserved areas including downtown Montgomery — the heart of the capital city — to demonstrate the lack of healthy food options, and statewide education on the importance of financing healthy food opportunities.

The hard work is paying off. The Alabama Legislature approved legislation creating the act establishing the fund, and the governor signed it into law in July.

To draw attention to the fact that 700,000 Dallas County residents live in lower-income communities with limited access to grocery stores, and to help to create solutions, The Food Trust and Children at Risk wrote and publicly released a report on the problem.

Titled *Food for Every Child: The Need for Healthy Food Retail in the Greater Dallas Area*, the report used sophisticated GPS technology to show the lack of access to healthy foods in Dallas County, as well as the associated health outcomes. Equally important, it made the case for the implementation of a healthy-corner-store initiative targeting underserved areas in Dallas.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance and funding*

Released at the Healthy Food Retail Summit held in Dallas in February, the report laid out a series of strategies such as a healthy food financing initiative to provide grants, loans and tax credits to bring new and improved supermarkets to lower-income, underserved communities, as well as a healthy corner store program to support existing small-store owners who want to increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods in their stores.

In addition to the report, public health advocates in Dallas are also creating strategies to work with the owners of existing small and corner stores to improve and support the sale of healthier food options.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance and funding*

BUILDING BIPARTISAN SUPPORT IN NORTH CAROLINA FOR HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS

In an era dominated by political squabbling, something different and refreshing is occurring in North Carolina. Political differences have been set aside by a group of politicians who want to do something about the 1.5 million North Carolinians — 20 percent of the state’s population — who lack easy access to healthy foods.

A bipartisan group of state representatives and senators have introduced legislation known as the Healthy Food Small Retailer/Corner Store Act. If passed, it will create a state-based system whereby local health departments will work with willing retail and

corner-store owners to stock healthy foods such as locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables, and fresh dairy products and meats. It will also provide training to help store owners better understand food safety and stocking procedures. If successful, the legislation will be a significant step forward in the effort to improve healthy eating in North Carolina, and reduce obesity and poor health.

The education effort associated with the bipartisan legislation has been led by the North Carolina Alliance for Health (NCAH), which advocates for policies that promote wellness and reduce the impact of tobacco and obesity, including in children.

“Because an unhealthy diet is a leading cause of obesity, we hope that by providing citizens, and specifically children, with access to fresh fruits and vegetables, we can decrease the rate of childhood obesity and chronic disease in North Carolina,” says Pam Seamans, executive director of the NCAH.

The bipartisan legislation to improve healthy food access in underserved areas of North Carolina has been introduced in both the state House and Senate.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance and funding*



DEMONSTRATING HEALTHY FOOD ACCESS CHALLENGES IN OKLAHOMA

While the phrase “show, don’t tell” has long been associated with creative writing, it can also apply to efforts to get the public and decision makers to better understand the challenges people face when it comes to accessing healthy foods. At least that’s what advocates in Oklahoma are doing with great success.

During their annual Heart Walk event, the American Heart Association of Oklahoma got volunteers to carry a bag of groceries for a mile, demonstrating the challenge many in Oklahoma face due to being isolated from healthy-food outlets and often without transportation. The federal government defines low-food access in an urban setting as someone living one mile or farther from a store that sells healthy foods.

Many of those who participated in the one-mile grocery walk described it as being a lot harder than they initially thought. One participant, who shared carrying a bag with another volunteer, said that if she had to carry it herself for the entire distance, the experience would have been “horrible.”

The grocery walk was organized to expand grassroots awareness in Oklahoma as to the struggle that thousands in that state experience just to find nutritious food, and to demonstrate the need for increasing access to healthy foods for residents living in areas with limited access to food. After participating in the walk, the volunteers universally said that they saw the need for more healthy food outlets to make food access easier.

The American Heart Association of Oklahoma also produced a video of the one-mile grocery walk to play online and share in social media channels to further build grassroots understanding of the need to improve healthy food access in the Sooner State.

The organization is now encouraging grassroots advocates to reach out to decision makers, such as city council members, and urge them to increase access to healthy foods in underserved neighborhoods of Oklahoma City, where 62% of residents are classified as having low food access.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance and funding*





MOBILIZING RELIGIOUS AND CIVIC COALITIONS IN LOUISIANA TO FUND FRESH-FOOD FINANCING

Louisiana has one of the highest adolescent obesity rates, ranking fourth in the nation. Not surprisingly, it also has some of the largest per-capita food deserts.

The lack of access to high-quality foods, and fresh fruits and vegetables is one of the key reasons why only 20 percent of adults in Louisiana eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day, while 32 percent eat snack or junk foods every day and 42 percent drink soft drinks daily.

Not surprisingly, in 2009 with overwhelming bipartisan support, the Louisiana Legislature created a fresh-food-financing initiative known as the “healthy food retail act.” However, they did not provide the funding to implement the act, which Edgar Cage of the organization Together Baton Rouge describes as “a car without gas.”

The lack of funding for the initiative led to a decision by an existing network of groups to create a coalition to push for solutions to the problem of healthy-food access. The coalition consists of religious and civic

groups, many of whom have worked together for years on other social issues.

The coalition embarked on a campaign to fund the healthy food retail act, and thereby began to remedy the food-desert problem that exists throughout Louisiana. The effort was also supported by the Louisiana agriculture commissioner and the agriculture and Black legislative caucuses. It employed a series of highly successful civic academy engagements, which combined statistics and facts with real-life experiences to educate the public and policymakers alike as to the challenges associated with low food access, and the opportunities that healthy foods financing would create.

In spite of a record state deficit of \$1.6 billion, the coalition was successful in 2015 in securing funding in the state budget for healthy foods financing. Unfortunately, the funding fell victim to a gubernatorial line-item veto, as did several other budget items. The coalition views the setback as temporary in a multi-year campaign designed to bring better access to quality food for Louisiana’s citizens.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance and funding*

CREATING A HEALTHY FOODS FINANCING INITIATIVE IN OHIO

Limited access to healthy foods is a statewide problem in Ohio, affecting an estimated 2 million residents. It not only affects urban neighborhoods in cities such as Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus and others, it also impacts many rural communities including those in the southern Appalachian region of the state.

Advocates in Ohio seized on that fact and began to educate the public and decision makers on the need for a healthy food financing fund to help provide financing for local grocery stores to make available healthier foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables.

The Ohio Healthy Food Financing Task Force, made up of a group of nearly 50 leaders from the health, business, civic, government, grocery, philanthropic and other nonprofit sectors, worked for a year to identify policy recommendations to help address the healthy-foods-access dilemma.

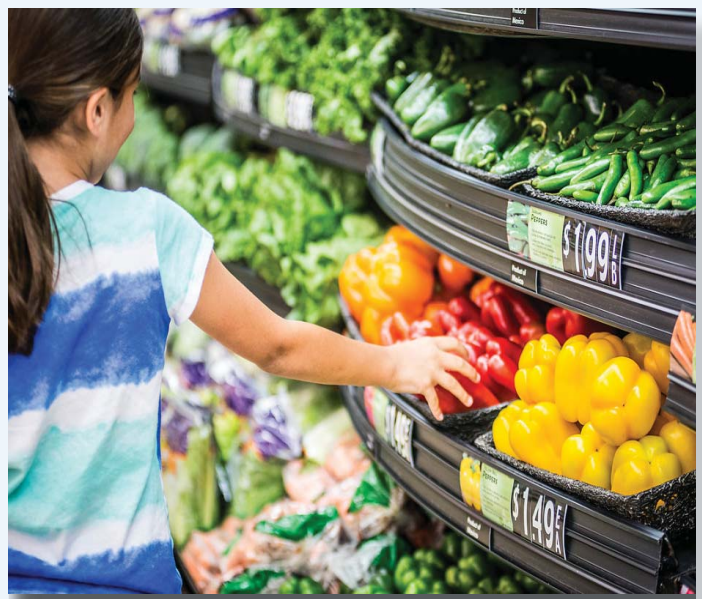
As part of its educational effort, the Task Force produced a widely publicized report entitled, “*Food for Every Child: The Need for Healthy Food Financing in Ohio.*” The report identified urban and rural areas across Ohio where healthy food retail development is needed most. It also noted the direct relationship between obesity in that state and a lack of access to healthy foods.

“Research shows that providing access to healthy foods and promoting healthy eating habits can help residents maintain a healthy weight and reduce diet-related diseases,” said Cresha Auck Foley, a Task Force member and director of government relations

for the American Heart Association in Ohio. The American Heart Association also produced an educational video that was used to build support for a healthy foods financing program in Ohio.

Due to the work of the task force and health advocates, support for a healthy food financing fund grew quickly and was approved by the legislature. In late June, Ohio Governor John Kasich signed into law a budget that includes \$2 million in seed capital to create a Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which will be a flexible grant and loan fund that will be administered through the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services.

Voices for Healthy Kids contribution: Technical assistance and funding





DECREASING THE CONSUMPTION AND PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM MARKETING FOR UNHEALTHY FOODS AND SUGAR-SWEETENED BEVERAGES.

Sugary drinks are a significant contributing factor to the nation's obesity epidemic. The Harvard School of Public Health estimates that one in four Americans consume at least 200 calories daily from such drinks; and 5% drink at least 567 calories — equivalent to four cans of soda per day. Just one sugar-sweetened soft drink every day could result in a weight gain of up to five pounds in a year.

Many of these sugary-beverage consumers are children and youth, a significant number of whom, by the time they become adults, will have consumed hundreds of thousands of excess calories from pop, sports drinks and sweetened juices. The health and societal cost of this consumption is breathtaking.

One study found that individuals who drink one to two sugar-sweetened beverages per day have a 26 percent higher risk for developing Type 2 diabetes. Voices for Healthy Kids is committed to helping America, and especially its children and youth, rethink the beverages they drink to help improve their long-term health.

SERVING HEALTHY DRINKS TO CHILDREN IN MARYLAND

The lives of children in the United States have become inundated by sugary beverages. They are served with children's meals in restaurants. They are used by some parents and caregivers as a reward.

A good share of the billions of dollars in advertising the sugar-sweetened beverage industry spends each year on television, in display advertising, on billboards and online is aimed directly at children and teenagers.

But amidst these troubling facts, there is good news. Health advocates in Maryland are working to successfully counter the influence of the sugar-sweetened beverage industry by making the healthy choice the easy choice for young children in that state. Beginning last fall, all licensed childcare center operators in Maryland were required to provide healthier drinks to children, and give better support for mothers who are breastfeeding. They are also being required to reduce non-educational screen time.

The three-pronged approach is the result of a new law that was pushed for largely by Sugar Free Kids Maryland, which was founded to reduce the twin epidemics of childhood obesity and teen diabetes. Robi Rawl, the executive director of Sugar Free Kids Maryland, says that the childcare center law was developed in large part because of the link between sugary drinks and the childhood obesity crisis.

“Public health experts have made it very clear that to combat childhood obesity, it’s imperative to focus on young children whose eating habits are still being formed, as well as on nutrition. This law does both, which is why we decided to put our efforts there,” she says.

Sugar Free Kids Maryland already has its sights set on two additional opportunities to further improve the health of the state’s children and youth. They will push for the passage of a measure that would require

restaurants that offer children’s menus to serve only healthy beverage items as part of the bundled kids’ meal price. The second measure would remove the sales tax on bottled water, which is currently taxed at the same rate as sugary drinks.

Voices for Healthy Kids contribution: Technical assistance

RETHINKING DRINKS IN ILLINOIS

Health advocates in Illinois are working to educate and mobilize residents in that state on the harmful effects of consuming sugar-sweetened beverages, and to encourage healthier beverage options. The campaign was kicked off in February 2014 with Illinois Governor Pat Quinn declaring that month as “Rethink Your Drink Month” in Illinois.

The campaign is the initiative of the Illinois Alliance to Prevent Obesity (IAPO). It was created due to the impact that sugar-sweetened beverages have on the health of Illinois residents.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported the 62 percent of adults in that state were either overweight or obese. Among adolescents, 15.5% were overweight, and 11.9% were obese. A full 31.1% of those surveyed by the CDC reported that they drank a can, bottle, or glass of soda or pop at least one time per day during the seven days before they were surveyed. Illinois spends \$6.3 billion annually treating obesity-related diseases.

Illinois Rethink Your Drink is hosting educational events in communities throughout the state, and distributing educational messages through partner organizations about the health impacts of sugary beverages, and how people can take steps to rethink their drinks and reduce consumption of those beverages. One of the tools being used is a poster campaign showing a glass filled with sugar cubes to demonstrate the amount of sugar in sugar-sweetened beverages.

The campaign is also partnering with community residents, leaders and policymakers to undertake major policy initiatives, including pushing for the passage of a penny per ounce excise tax on sugary beverages with revenues going to community prevention and the Illinois Medicaid program.

IAPO consists of more than 40 supporting organizations including the University of Illinois Chicago School of Public Health, Illinois Association of School Nurses, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois, the American Heart Association and others.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Technical assistance and funding*

PUSHING FOR A SUGAR SWEETENED BEVERAGE FEE IN CALIFORNIA

Seeing the impact of sugary beverages on Californians, and especially low income communities in that state, advocates with the American Heart Association and the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California made strides this past year in getting California decision makers to focus on the problem. They did so through the introduction of legislation to

implement a 2-cent-per-ounce health impact excise fee on sugary drinks sold in that state, as well as through a series of workshops and educational forums with community health workers and other community leaders to educate them on the dangers of sugary beverages and diabetes.

Revenue raised from the proposed fee, an estimated \$3 billion annually, would be used to create a “Children’s and Family Health Promotion Program” to prevent and treat obesity, diabetes, heart and dental disease—diseases directly linked to the intake of sugary beverages.

“We are tired of burying our family members from Type 2 diabetes. It is a tragedy that this disease is so prevalent in our community that many Latinos now believe that getting diabetes is normal. The revenue from AB 1357 [would] establish a long overdue, sustained funding source for diabetes prevention in California, prioritizing communities with the highest diabetes rates,” says Xavier Morales, executive director of the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California.

In May, the proposal only fell four votes short in the California Assembly’s Health Committee, losing 10-6. Nonetheless, the advocates believe support throughout California is continuing to build for a sugary-drink fee due to the growing and diverse coalition supporting it, which will be invaluable in future sessions of the California Assembly.

*Voices for Healthy Kids contribution:
Funding and technical assistance*



ACCELERATING MOMENTUM

In the upcoming year, Voices for Healthy Kids will accelerate the movement across our nation to help all children grow up at a healthy weight by ensuring they have access to healthy affordable foods and safe places to be active.

Our focus is aimed on five key strategies that will help all children experience healthy environments, no matter who they are or where they live:

Ensuring that all children enter kindergarten at a healthy weight.

Making a healthy school environment the norm and not the exception across the United States.

Making physical activity part of the everyday experience for children and youth.

Making healthy foods the affordable, available, and desired choice in all neighborhoods.

Eliminating consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages before the age of 5.

Voices for Healthy Kids supports policy changes that will help ensure kids get the best start in life in their community (where they live), at school (where they learn) and when under the care of out-of-school time or early care and education providers (where they play). Collectively, these victories build momentum for more communities to provide what all children need to achieve ideal health. This is critical to provide a healthy future for all our nation’s children and to build a strong, inclusive culture of health.

Throughout all we do, we carefully consider how we can improve the lives of those who are most impacted; every child in America should have the opportunity to grow up at a healthy weight. We are going to keep learning from the places that are driving down rates of childhood obesity, and by working together in the united movement, we will make lasting change throughout the entire nation.



TAKING ACTION TO PREVENT OBESITY



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

