

Creating Healthier Communities to Reverse Childhood Obesity

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THE CHALLENGE

Today, more than 23 million children and adolescents in the United States – nearly one in three young people – are obese or overweight, putting them at higher risk for heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and other serious diseases (RWJF 2011). The burden on our economy and health care system is staggering. Adult obesity costs as much as \$147 billion per year; childhood obesity alone costs up to \$14 billion each year in direct health care costs (RWJF 2011). Obesity is also a leading cause of worker sick days and school absenteeism – trends that jeopardize our economic strength.

Reversing this epidemic is a critical strategy for making our nation healthier and stronger, saving lives, protecting the viability of our health care system, and increasing economic productivity for the next generation of American workers.

Y-USA'S HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES INITIATIVES

The experiences of successful communities, backed by the latest scientific research, show that creating healthy environments is key to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic. When children have safe places to walk, bike, and play, they are more likely to be active and less likely to be obese. It is the same with healthy food: when communities have supermarkets and corner stores that sell nutritious affordable foods, families eat better.

At the YMCA (the Y), we believe that the health of our communities shapes the health of our people. We are committed to improving the health of communities by engaging local leaders to drive changes in policies, systems, and environments that help children and families be active and eat well. Today, more than 200 communities across the nation participate in the Y's Healthier Communities Initiatives (HCI), which include three distinct efforts: Pioneering Healthier Communities (PHC); Action Communities for Health, Innovation & Environmental Change (ACHIEVE); and Statewide Pioneering Healthier Communities (Statewide PHC).

Two initiatives – PHC and ACHIEVE – are funded with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). PHC began with corporate support and then expanded to CDC support in 2005. It was one of the first policy, systems, and environmental change efforts focused on a leadership model that the CDC funded. Similar initiatives, like ACHIEVE, Communities Putting Prevention to Work, and Community Transformation Grants, have utilized similar principles and strategies.

In 2008 the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) awarded a \$6.8 million grant to Y-USA to support the expansion of PHC's community-based model into the Statewide PHC. With this funding, Y-USA has continued to spread its learning and experience to 32 communities and has developed statewide models for six states with some of the highest childhood obesity rates in the country. The Statewide PHC initiative aligns with other strategic investments made by RWJF. The foundation, which has pledged \$500 million to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015, helps educate policymakers about the most promising ways to address childhood obesity, and supports advocates who are developing strong grassroots movements in communities across the country.

OUR STRATEGY

All of the Y's HCI focus on the importance of a healthy lifestyle; building relationships within communities; strengthening the capacity for coalition building in communities; attracting and engaging volunteers; and empowering communities to drive policy and environmental changes that support healthy living. The initiatives share common key principles:

- High-level community leaders are involved at every step, utilizing their positions, influence, and ability to make changes within their organization and within the greater community.
- Multiple sectors and diverse organizations are involved to maximize experience, assets, resources, and skills.

- The ultimate goal is to influence policy and environmental changes to improve community environments.
- Local initiatives are organically grown with strategies specific to the needs of each community.
- The Y serves as the community convener and co-leads with partners.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

In a recent survey*, 91 of Y-USA's healthier community sites reported that they influenced **14,459** changes to support healthy living within their communities, affecting up to **34.3** million lives, including:

- **568** strategies providing greater access to healthier foods in communities;
- **318** strategies to provide greater access to physical activity in communities;
- **4,526** changes to ensure access to healthier food before, during, and after school;
- **3,223** changes to increase access to physical activity before, during, and after school;
- **2,091** changes helping private employers provide healthier food/beverages or expand physical activity opportunities;
- **1,277** changes by community-based organizations and public agencies on healthier food/beverage or expanded physical activity opportunities; and
- **2,774** strategies advanced to provide environments that are smoke-free.

** As of April 2011; self-reported data from 91 of 176 sites*

LEADING PRACTICES

Over the eight years of work engaging communities in HCI, several leading practices emerged as the keys to success of the model:

- **Start with a shared, compelling vision and spirit of inquiry.** Identifying shared values and creating a compelling vision have helped HCI teams form a strong foundation. By making the end goal bigger than something any single organization can achieve on its own, HCI teams open a door to new, often unexpected, opportunities for learning and collaboration.
- **Adapt to emerging opportunities.** HCI leaders are anchored by a shared vision and committed to an opportunistic mindset, which allow them to adapt their efforts to emerging opportunities while still staying on track.
- **Borrow from others and build your own.** When people believe that the change they desire is possible, they are more likely to engage in creating that change in their community. Many HCI participants are inspired to act because they see what members of another community have achieved.
- **Engage cross-boundary leaders who care.** Building cross-sector teams of action-oriented community decisionmakers

who care deeply about community well-being is key. HCI teams typically include leadership from the Ys; schools and academic institutions; government agencies and elected officials; hospitals; health insurance companies; public health organizations; businesses; community- and health-focused foundations; faith-based groups; media; and other community sectors.

- **Serve in multiple roles.** At different times, HCI teams may find themselves serving as conveners, promoters, policy advocates, educators, and/or implementers. Being versatile and clear about each person's role is essential.
- **Use data to guide, not drive, the effort.** HCI teams rely on data but recognize that efforts are about creating change, not collecting data.
- **Develop leadership structures that distribute ownership and action.** Leading an initiative with ambitious aims, limited staffing, and busy volunteers requires a well-designed structure and effective processes to ensure that team members stay engaged and use their talent and time wisely. Some HCI teams complement the structure of existing initiatives; others work more independently.

SIGNS OF SUCCESS

HCI efforts strive to achieve long-term cultural shifts. While it is too early to evaluate changes in health status, it is critical to look for signs that HCI teams are on course. Signs of early-stage success include:

- **New Policies and Environmental Changes:** These types of changes are being put into place across virtually all HCI. Many of these changes have a strong research basis to suggest that they will produce lasting behavioral changes that lead to health improvements.
- **Behavioral Change and Health Outcomes:** A large number of HCI teams are measuring and observing behavior changes in favor of healthy living.
- **Growth of Collaborative Culture:** While this is difficult to measure, there are signs that a truly collaborative culture is starting to form across traditional community silos and lines.

With support from RWJF and other funders and partners, the Y is mobilizing local leaders and using its nationwide reach to build a movement that will affect lasting change and truly improve the health of children and families.

SOURCES

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), "Childhood Obesity," <<http://www.rwjf.org/programareas/ChildhoodObesityFramingDoc.pdf>>, March 2011.

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