

# IMPACT IN MARYLAND



## CHILDCARE CENTERS GIVE CHILDREN HEALTHIER FUTURES

Starting this fall, children in childcare centers in Maryland are seeing a new, healthy emphasis added to the term “care.” As of October 1, all licensed childcare center operators in the state are required to provide healthier drinks to children, give better support for mothers who are breastfeeding, and reduce non-educational screen time.

Passage of the law requiring the childcare changes was largely due to the work of Sugar Free Kids Maryland, which was founded to reduce the twin epidemics of childhood obesity and teen diabetes. Voices for Healthy Kids provides funding support to Sugar Free Kids Maryland, a statewide advocacy group that includes MedChi, the Maryland State Medical Society, the American Heart Association, the NAACP and the Horizon Foundation.

“Maryland is a well-resourced state in that it is the wealthiest state in the nation and has a highly educated citizenry. Given these factors, our health outcomes should be sizably better than the nation,” said Robi Rawl, the executive director of Sugar Free Kids Maryland. “One in three children is classified as overweight or obese in Maryland and almost a quarter of teens are being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.”

Rawl 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.”

The law is expected to have an important, positive impact, on communities of color in Maryland. The Maryland State Conference of the NAACP “saluted” the legislature for passing the law because communities of color in that state are disproportionately impacted by rising rates of obesity and teen-age onset diabetes. A spokesperson for the NAACP said that the organization was confident the law “will improve the health of young Marylanders for decades to come.”

The law is based on the highly successful “Healthy Child Care” program in Howard County, Maryland, which was created in 2011 by Healthy Howard, Inc. That program resulted in a significant increase in healthy beverage and food offerings at about 100 childcare facilities in the county. Like the new law, it also works to increase physical activity, limit screen time, and increase breast feeding.

Glenn E. Schneider, chief program officer with the Horizon Foundation, which helped to fund the Howard County program, says the new state law will build on and enhance the Howard County model. “Engaging all 400+ child care centers and family providers in Howard County would have taken forever. Thanks to our new state law, all children living in Howard County and across the state will grow and learn in healthier child care environments for years to come.”



As important and far reaching as the new child care health and nutrition standards are to children and families in Maryland, Sugar Free Kids Maryland already has its sights set on additional opportunities to further improve the health of the state’s children and youth. In the upcoming session of the Maryland General Assembly, the coalition will push for the passage of two measures. The first would require restaurants that offer children’s menus to serve only healthy beverage items as part of the bundled kids’ meal price. (Several restaurant chains have already implemented a similar policy.) The second would remove the sales tax on bottled water, which is currently taxed at the same rate as sugary drinks.

Rawl said both measures are important to the health of Maryland families, especially those who live in low-income communities that commonly have restaurants serving poorer nutritional choices, and tap water that is often perceived to be unsafe due to an older infrastructure and potential for lead in the pipes.

“Making healthy drinks more readily available and affordable will help support families who want to make the healthy choice,” says Rawl.

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