

Stories from the Field: New Jersey

Creating a State Partnership for Action on Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity

During 2003–2004, the Childhood Weight Status Survey showed that more than one in three children living in New Jersey who were in the sixth grade were either overweight or obese. As a result, the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) decided to take action. The state legislature commissioned a task force of agriculture, education, and transportation professionals and other stakeholders to develop an Obesity Prevention Action Plan (OPAP). “One key recommendation of the OPAP was that there needed to be a coordinating body dedicated to obesity prevention. In response, in 2007, the health commissioner created an Office of Nutrition & Fitness (ONF),” says Karin Mille, RD, Nutrition Consultant in the ONF. “This was critical in establishing the health department as the leader for coordination of obesity efforts in the state.” However, at that time, no funding or staff were dedicated to the ONF, and New Jersey was in the midst of a hiring freeze that threatened to continue indefinitely.

In an effort to find an oasis in their funding and staffing desert, Mille and colleagues, including the New Jersey Fruit and Vegetable Program Coordinator and the Child and Adolescent Health Program Manager, dedicated many hours to applying for funding offered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity (DNPAO). “We weren’t linked in with CDC DNPAO at the time, and we didn’t know if we would be funded. When we got word of the funding announcement, we saw it as a real opportunity to make inroads in our state. I sincerely think it was just our passion, commitment, and resource limitations” says Ms. Mille.

At the time the funding application was submitted, New Jersey was the only state mandating statewide implementation of a process developed by CDC and the National Association of City and County Health Officials called Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP). Every regional health department in the state was required to implement the MAPP process. Twenty-one county Community Health Improvement Plans had been completed, and the combination of decreasing obesity, improving nutrition, and increasing physical activity was noted as the second most important public health priority statewide. At the same time, New Jersey had the dubious distinction among the 50 states of having the highest documented rates of obesity in low-income children ages 2–5 years. Because of all these factors, the local public health system was ready to mobilize and coordinate its partnerships and activities, and momentum pertaining to the obesity issue grew at the county level.



On March 1, 2008, within a few months of being notified of the first funding award, Mille and her colleagues were notified of another funding award. This one, a DHSS and Department of Education award, was for a cooperative agreement for Coordinated School Health from CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health, which also focuses on nutrition and physical activity. Financial support and technical assistance offered through these two funding mechanisms strengthened ONF's capacity to begin the collaborative efforts needed to halt further increases in obesity and other chronic diseases.



Importance of Early Success

New Jersey has made significant progress in advancing obesity prevention and partnership efforts with funding through cooperative agreements from CDC's NPAO division. ONF invited strategic partners to the inaugural kickoff event launching the partnership at the New Jersey-based Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which hosted and sponsored the event. An external contract was implemented to hire both the needed staff to work in the ONF and an objective, external facilitator to ensure deadlines were met during the creation of the state obesity plan.

The kickoff event was a valuable networking opportunity for both organizations and individuals. According to Mille, "The kickoff event was the beginning of a highly engaged, robust, partner-driven process. A partnership of this magnitude could not have been undertaken without the resources of this cooperative agreement."

Lessons Learned

- Develop and maintain a varied, diverse, and dynamic partner base early on.
- Expand partnerships within state government departments and obtain both the needed high-level buy-in and the complimentary resource commitment.
- Launch the partnership early, even with minimal staff.
- Articulate the vision and mission of the partnership and ensure that partners are trained to communicate the messages.
- Ensure a representation from a range of public and private partners in all settings, including child care, community, healthcare, schools, and worksites/businesses.
- Offer more in-depth training opportunities to partners that can be replicated.

Contacts:

Karin Mille
Phone: (609) 777-9045
Email: karin.mille@doh.state.nj.us
Web site: www.shapingnj.gov

Lisa Asare
Phone: (609) 292-2129
Email: lisa.asare@doh.state.nj.us