



New Jersey: Stakeholders Move a State Obesity Prevention Plan Into Action

New Jersey's Obesity Prevention Plan was originally developed in 2006. Like many such plans, it listed a wide variety of possible activities

that could help reverse the obesity epidemic across the state, but it didn't seem to lead to much action or change. In 2010, after several years of working with the plan, staff in the Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) Office of Nutrition and Fitness (ONF) decided it was time to try again.



As a first step, they took an honest, rigorous look at the Obesity Prevention Plan's strengths and weaknesses. The list of strategies and activities seemed comprehensive, but the plan fell short in terms of guiding or inspiring any implementation. It lacked priorities and timetables—both essential to action. Even more troubling was a lack of engagement and ownership among the many partners who could have been more involved, but weren't.

A New Approach to Partnership

In 2009, ShapingNJ, the statewide partnership for obesity prevention, elected to approach all future decisions by using community engagement. To the ShapingNJ partners, this meant shared power and governance would take place in all communication, decision making, and leadership by the collaborative.

Along with this new approach, the ONF team identified several specific opportunities to boost engagement from partners and the communities they represent. These included putting technology to use, engaging communities across New Jersey to provide feedback on strategies and implementation, and courting new partners by finding common ground.

To improve communication among partners, ONF turned to technology to create a virtual learning community. With the help of a facilitator, the team urged partners to use the new technology, even if it was unfamiliar or intimidating, and offered training and coaching to help them do so. The new online portal was used live during workgroup meetings to encourage partners to sign in and become more comfortable with this mode of communication and connection. Again, the investment paid off. The online tool is now a routine feature of the partners' work together and is used for resource sharing, voting on strategies, workgroup tasks, and other collaborative tasks. The online portal has made participation easier for partners scattered across the state and gives all partners an equal say during meetings.

To increase community engagement and buy-in, 10 partners hosted community discussions across the state, specifically designed to collect feedback on strategies geared to the needs of diverse populations. More than 100 community members—representing different age groups, businesses, hospitals, schools, child care providers, and communities—participated.

During the sessions, community members were asked to comment on specific environmental and policy change strategies that had been developed by members of the partnership. Their feedback helped emphasize connections such as the relationship of safety to physical activity in many neighborhoods, which also increased the need to bring law enforcement partners to the table. Another example was the insights of child care providers, who urged more involvement from the parents of their young clients. Without modeling and reinforcement at home (particularly from mothers), they pointed out, any changes in physical activity and healthier foods in child care settings were unlikely to make much of a difference.



Courting New Partners and Connecting Them to Each Other

The original partnership was built on an existing obesity prevention coalition—a natural starting point, but one that didn't necessarily reflect the many different sectors and agencies with shared interests in obesity prevention. To expand the plan's implementation, the ONF team intentionally reached out to partners in other fields, which sometimes required taking a back seat as the plan's coordinator and funder. ONF staff brings strategies, data, evidence-based programs, and potential funders to the table, but see the partners as true co-pilots—and as the leaders in terms of implementing strategies on the ground. Through ShapingNJ, partners can coordinate efforts and easily connect to others involved in a similar setting—such as schools or workplaces—or to those who share a particular interest in terms of strategies; such as, the built environment, physical activity, or healthy food retailing.

To help make the case to prospective partners, the ONF team has developed a benefits portfolio far beyond the funding opportunities that typically draw organizations into coalitions and partnerships. These include training, tools, and networking opportunities. The team works hard to identify specific, meaningful tasks that connect partners to ShapingNJ strategies, because they may not always see a role for themselves. Another advantage is connecting smaller efforts—such as a community garden or farmers' market—to a larger, successful statewide plan. "Fundors like to see that connection to a broader set of strategies," an ONF staff member observed.

As new partners have joined the effort, networking among them has generated ideas for new ways to collaborate. For example, a private fitness center worked with children's health and family resource center partners to develop a wellness program targeted to children with special needs. A Team Nutrition grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture was awarded to the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, which then partnered with Rutgers University to train school foodservice managers in offering healthier cafeteria food, including both a greater volume and variety of fruits and vegetables. The same grant offered school district superintendents tools for developing stronger local school nutrition and physical activity policies, potentially reaching thousands of students and their families across the state. A nonprofit organization focused on hydroponic and urban farming now partners with a Newark hospital to sell fresh produce to hospital staff and the surrounding community.

Lessons Learned

The evolution of New Jersey's Obesity Prevention Plan—and the engagement of partners who can bring it to life—has yielded several lessons. ONF staff are still in learning mode, but offer the following suggestions:

- Reach out to nontraditional partners, paying particular attention to "What's in it for them?" and using their perspective or language. For example, the business community may respond to arguments about Return on Investment (ROI), even if the strategy being discussed is lactation support in the workplace. Finding common ground with those who don't see obesity prevention as "their" issue (e.g., among breastfeeding advocates) may require some patience and effort, but is likely to yield new partners and new energy.
- Embrace technology. The online portal tool was initially difficult for some partners, but coaching and encouragement helped them overcome their reluctance and strengthened the partnership particularly in the planning phase, from efficiency to participation levels.
- Networking is highly valued. Partners consistently respond that the networking opportunities presented by ShapingNJ are important to them—both among partners whose paths they might not otherwise cross, and with those sharing similar goals and agendas.

More importantly, engaging the community has really shaped the nature and scope of the former obesity prevention coalition as ShapingNJ continues to mature. "It allowed us to carefully consider what it means to be a partner," observes an ONF staff member—a key ingredient missing from the earlier plan, and at the heart of the new one.

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