



Planting Seeds and Growing Healthy Communities in Arkansas

The Arkansas Department of Health is planting seeds and growing healthy communities to combat the obesity crisis in their state. The Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention partners with the Department of Health in a statewide effort to support five communities, known as Growing Healthy Communities, to increase physical activity and healthy eating through policy and environmental change.



Each Growing Healthy Communities site started with a planning team, which included the mayor, other elected officials, a hometown health representative, and other stakeholders. Each planning team attended a 3-day training class where national and regional experts provided information on the most promising strategies to increase options for healthier foods and opportunities for physical activity.

At the beginning of the training, one mayor admitted openly that he did not know what to expect, truly took the training to heart. During a session break, Mayor Rick Elumbaugh of Batesville, a small town of 10,000 residents, contacted his city planner and told him to remove all soft drinks from vending machines in city-owned parks and offer only bottled water. As a former physical education teacher, Mayor Elumbaugh knew the importance of the parks in providing safe places for Batesville residents to be active, but until the training, he had not made the connection between vending policies and health.

After the training, the planning teams returned to their communities armed with action plans and some funding. As activities got underway, communities enlisted individuals from the chambers of commerce, rotary clubs, city councils, gardeners' associations, and various transportation programs to join their leadership teams. The active participation and continued commitment from the mayors and other elected officials went a long way to promote "community buy-in" for the projects, and gave the project even more visibility. This created a formidable alliance between the community and local leaders and allowed residents to claim "ownership" for improving their health and their communities.

Once all the seeds were sown, it was time for the projects to take root and make a difference. A Growing Healthy Communities site in the northeast region of the state established a "no-peddlers" farmers' market policy to increase access to fresher, healthier, more affordable food options. Only locally-grown

Partner with your state's municipal league

Consider **reframing obesity** as a public health issue to obesity as an **economic issue**. The Department of Health presented this information to the **Arkansas Municipal League**, a voluntary group of municipal officials: mayors, city managers, aldermen, city directors, and attorneys from surrounding cities and towns. It was so well-received that the Arkansas Department of Health and the **Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention** were invited to attend the League's annual meeting. The presentation for this meeting went **beyond the economic toll** of the obesity crisis and focused on **what city leaders could do** to address the issue.



produce—farmed within 100 miles—could be sold at the market. Another community made one of its wider streets safer and more convenient for all users. The original width of the street allowed cars to speed and was not conducive to bicyclists. By painting bike lanes, the city was able to slow cars, encourage more orderly flow of traffic, and promote cycling. And yet another site, looking at its municipal projects through the Growing Healthy Communities lens, realized how easy and cost-effective it could be to upgrade and update their sidewalks to provide safe walking routes as they replaced their sewer system. Had they not participated in the training, they would not have considered the sidewalk upgrade.



Several other sites focused on developing school-community gardens as a way to increase healthier food access and create a stronger sense of community. One initiative was met with such enthusiasm that the mayor, local legislators, judges, school superintendent, students, and hundreds of residents attended the groundbreaking ceremony. Within the same year, that same School Community Garden Partnership was able to engage a major partner to update and expand the garden's irrigation system, increasing the garden's capacity.

The Growing Healthy Communities sites were able to make significant policy and environmental changes to increase healthy eating and physical activity with limited funding. It is no secret that part of the success was the active, continuous participation of the elected officials, the community buy-in and support, and partnerships. And while everyone agreed the progress was exceptional for the small amount of funding and the short amount of time, they did admit the Growing Healthy Communities project was a bit ambitious, trying to fit so much in such a short amount of time.

The Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention and the Arkansas Department of Health continue to nurture the seeds they are sowing through the Growing Healthy Communities sites, expanding their reach to ensure that the state as a whole can grow healthier and reduce obesity one community at a time.

Reality Check

Growing Healthy Communities was a very ambitious effort and communities were committed to making big, long-term changes, but they really did not have the funding or capacity to make some of these changes. So there was a moment of "re-focus" when the communities were encouraged to go for the quick, visible victories that could be sustained over time—the "low-hanging fruit." One community hired a part-time manager for their farmers' market, but with the encouragement to make quick, visible changes, they also wanted to do something that would stand out and attract customers immediately. They painted the market walls with vibrant, eye-catching colors. Between the new manager and the new look, the farmers' market made a profit for the first time.

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