

Alice Lenihan, RD, MPH, LDN and Arnette Cowan, MS, RD, LDN Improving Nutrition Standards for Child Care Centers in North Carolina

***For** many years, Alice Lenihan had the dream and goal of improving nutrition standards for the state's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). She is thrilled to see her dream and her hard work pay off with North Carolina's new forward-thinking standards.*

Improving the State's Nutrition Standards

In 2009, the North Carolina General Assembly **passed a bill** requiring the state Child Care Commission to develop improved nutrition standards as well as guidelines for increased levels of physical activity in child care facilities. This work was to be completed through two divisions within the state Department of Health and Human Services, the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) and the Division of Public Health. The Public Health Division's specific role was to develop recommendations for stronger nutrition standards.

To guide the development of these new recommendations, Alice, then head of the Nutrition Services Branch of the Public Health Division, and Arnette Cowan, Supervisor of the Branch's CACFP Unit, organized four listening sessions around the state in 2010. The purpose of these sessions was to gather input from child care providers, health care professionals and state child care commissioners on what they would like to see in the strengthened standards.

At these sessions, participants showcased the programs and activities already underway to provide healthier meals and snacks in child care facilities, and they shared what support and resources they needed to be able to offer healthier meals. Alice said that these listening sessions were the most exciting meetings of her career! They heard from many people around the state who were already making changes — and from people who were committed to making changes — to help young children eat more nutritiously.

Alice and Arnette and their colleagues at the Nutrition Services Branch worked collaboratively with child care licensing staff and with the DCDEE to craft their recommendations to the state Child Care Commission (see **recommendations**.) This group recommended a two-phased process to strengthen the nutrition standards. The first phase focused on measures that were inexpensive and easy to implement and that would not require a lot of training for child care providers. Requirements in Phase One included no sugar-sweetened beverages, no whole milk for children older than two years, no flavored milk, and no juice in babies'



Pictured: Arnette Cowan, MS, RD, LDN

About Alice and Arnette

Alice worked at the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services for 34 years. She headed up the Nutrition Services Branch before retiring in 2012.

Arnette is the Branch's Nutrition Program Supervisor and leads the CACFP and Summer Food Program (SFP). Arnette has more than 28 years of experience and has worked in public health her entire career. She has been with the Program for more than 14 years, with 12 of those years serving as the supervisor for CACFP and SFSP. In her spare time, Arnette enjoys gardening, trying new recipes and traveling.

bottles. The General Assembly adopted these recommendations as the new standards in early 2011.

Phase Two includes limits on grains, added sugar, high fat and high salt foods. These measures will have a higher cost and will require additional training for child care providers. In addition, the Nutrition Branch will need to work with food suppliers to make sure that they can provide healthier options.

To help the state implement both phases of the strengthened standards, in 2010 the USDA-FNS awarded the Nutrition Services Branch a two-year Wellness Grant for more than \$900,000. The grant funded a number of components:

- **Developing a nutrition and physical activity curriculum through the community college system.** Five community colleges provided the curriculum, Best Practices for Nutrition and Physical Activity, a six-week 20-hour course for child care providers. The goal is to implement these modules in all 58 of the state's community colleges.
- **Creating five online Stages of Change nutrition modules.** Western Michigan University developed this course to teach child care providers and parents about healthy eating. The web-based system directs users toward educational materials and tools tailored to their readiness to change behavior. This approach increases the likelihood of success.
- **Developing the Healthy Futures Starting in the Kitchen training.** This cooking preparation training through Central Piedmont Community College taught child care providers and cooks how to prepare healthier meals.
- **Breastfeeding Friendly Childcare.** The North Carolina Kids Eat Smart Move More Program will develop a sample breastfeeding policy for child care centers. Centers and homes that meet the state's Breastfeeding Friendly criteria will receive a certificate and will be recognized at the North Carolina CACFP conference.
- **Developing additional nutrition education materials for child care providers.**

All of these training opportunities have been very popular. Both the community colleges and the child care providers have been excited and engaged. In addition, the Nutrition Services Branch awarded mini grants to child care centers participating in CACFP to implement nutrition and physical activity programs. Child care providers have used those funds for a variety of activities, from gardening to field trips to taste testings. Providers have also used grant funds to attend the Healthy Future in the Kitchen trainings.



ASPHN
Advancing Health Through Leadership
formerly ASTPHND

Association of State Public Health Nutritionists
P.O. Box 1001 • Johnstown, PA 15907-1001
[tel] 814.255.2829 • [fax] 814.255.6514
www.asphn.org

Lessons Learned

One of the exciting pieces that Alice and Arnette learned through this process is that people in North Carolina are hungry for nutrition information! Child care providers are eager to learn how they can feed young children more healthy foods. The children are also excited about the new foods they are eating, and they are even going home and asking their parents to buy and serve them!

One of the challenges is transferring to parents the new information and tips about healthy eating that child care providers are gaining so that the children hear a consistent message about healthy eating both at home and at day care.

Another lesson they learned is the importance of being strategic in establishing partnerships. Alice and Arnette looked at where child care providers go for information, and who they trust. While it may be different in other states, an obvious partner in North Carolina is the community colleges. Child care providers are required to attend a local community college to meet their continuing education requirements.

Public Health Nutritionists Are Essential

Public health nutritionists are professionals with academic training and experience in both public health **and** nutrition, who are often registered dietitians with advanced degrees. Public health nutritionists possess diverse skills and expertise ranging from nutrition science...to food systems and food environments...to finance and grant management.

More information on the role and value of public health nutritionists is available in ASPHN's briefs on **The Role of Public Health Nutrition in Obesity Prevention and Improving the Nutritional Well-Being of Women, Children and Families.**