Obesity Prevention success stories

Association of State Public Health Nutritionists

Becky Adams, MPH, RD, LD, CDE
Arkansas' Growing Healthy Communities Project

In 2009, *the Arkansas Department of Health, with the Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention (ArCOP), launched the Growing Healthy Communities Project. The Project is a collaborative effort to increase physical activity and healthy eating in Arkansas residents through policy and environmental change strategies. Becky Adams, then Associate Chief of the Arkansas Department of Health's Lifestage Branch, was also ArCOP co-chair at that time and actively involved in developing and implementing the project.*

Becky and her colleagues in the Coalition launched the project in five communities, with a planning team in each community. The teams included the mayor and other elected officials, a Hometown Health Coalition representative, and other key stakeholders. Each community planning team attended three days of training where team members learned promising strategies to increase access to healthy foods and physical activity options. The teams gained tips for how to build relationships in the community to move the project forward. Trainers assisted the community planning teams in developing a local action plan to address areas of need in their community. The Coalition also provided the teams with funding to help them implement their action plans.

Becky and Coalition staff facilitated planning efforts and helped to build relationships. The Coalition developed training materials, provided technical assistance and offered consultations to help the community teams implement their action plans. Coalition partners also provided technical assistance, facilitated training workshops, and shared model policy and environmental change strategies with the community teams.

Successes and Major Outcomes

Growing Healthy Communities had many successes! This collaborative project developed a strong alliance between the Coalition and the local teams as well as with community leaders. Moreover, this inclusive process brought local residents together to participate in creating the policy and environmental changes that are helping to improve the health of their neighbors, friends and families.

Each year, more communities join the project. To date, Growing Healthy Communities has directly reached more than 30,000 people. The strategies the teams implemented affected an additional 535,488 people around the state.

Pictured: Becky Adams, MPH, RD, LD, CDE

About Becky

Becky is the Partnership and Policy Support Director for the Chronic Disease Prevention and Control Branch in the Arkansas Department of Health. She has been with the Department since 1999. Becky has a Masters of Public Health from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. She is currently pursuing her Doctorate in Public Health Leadership.

Becky represents ASPHN on the ASTHO Prevention Policy Committee. She participates on the Advocacy Committee and chairs the ASPHN Obesity Prevention Nutrition Council Steering Committee. Becky is a registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator.

Here are some of the project's outcomes:

- Residents have greater access to fresh, locally grown produce at farmers' markets and through school and community gardens.
- Community leaders developed a better understanding of the importance of connectivity between where people live, work, shop and play. The project communities now have more trails, bike paths and sidewalks.
- A number of communities adopted healthy vending policies. One community's policy requires that water is the only beverage available in parks and recreation areas.
- Promising new ideas and programs have emerged that can be replicated in other communities.
- Communities received funding from local organizations and from the federal Communities Putting Prevention to Work grant program because of the project's capacity building efforts.
- In 2013, ArCOP funded 37 communities to complete 46 projects. Communities leveraged another $115,500 in in-kind or matching gifts. In 2014, ArCOP awarded more than $83,000 in grants to communities for farmers' markets, community and school gardens, worksite wellness programs, farm to school programs, and other projects.

Findings and Lessons Learned

Becky says that the large and committed network of partnerships that this project developed is a key component of its successes. "It was so exciting to see the energy and involvement of the people who made this project possible," Becky says.

One of the surprises in the project was that mayors and other key decision makers came to the trainings — and stayed for all three days. The lesson learned was that we can't assume that busy people won't see the value in the project and join in.

In 2014, ArCOP is piloting new recognition levels that will give greater acknowledgement to communities that are continuing on with their projects. "We want Growing Healthy Communities to continue to be seen as a desirable achievement for a community," Becky says. The three new levels are:

- **Emerging** – Emerging Communities are ready to join in the project.
- **Blossoming** – Blossoming Communities are implementing their action plans.
- **Thriving** – Thriving Communities are able to demonstrate change through data and success stories.

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If you would like to find out more about Arkansas' Growing Healthy Communities Project, you can contact Becky at **501-661-2334 or Becky.Adams2@Arkansas.gov**.

Challenges

One of the challenges that the coalition faced was limited capacity to expand Growing Healthy Communities into more communities. The Coalition did not have enough staff and volunteers to provide technical assistance and training to additional communities. To meet that challenge, the Coalition team trained people in the community teams to take on a number of tasks, including conducting walkability and access assessments. The Coalition also hired a coordinator to facilitate communication with all the community teams.

Another challenge was the distance community teams had to travel to attend the Growing Healthy Communities trainings. The Coalition now holds regional trainings around the state, so people don't have to travel so far to attend.

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The Important Role of the Public Health Nutritionist

As public health nutritionists, Becky and her colleagues brought the depth of their knowledge of best practices for policy, systems and environmental change. They also contributed their skills in building strong and diverse partnerships and their ability to communicate successfully with partners in many different organizations.

As an ASPHN member, Becky brought to the project her experience in leadership development and her connection with a strong network of public health nutritionists doing similar work in other states. She contributed her knowledge of successful policies and projects and of national trends and issues. She also brought to the project access to resources through CDC, Center TRT and other organizations.

ASPHN in Action

ASPHN is a non-profit membership organization that provides state and national leadership on food and nutrition policy, programs and services aimed at improving the health of our population. Our vision is to create new environmental norms where healthy eating and active living are the easy and natural choices for all Americans.

At ASPHN, we build our members' skills as public health nutritionists by providing key resources and professional development.

To learn more about ASPHN, please visit us on the web at **www.asphn.org**.

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