



Researchers Identify Successful Strategies from Previous Public Health Campaigns to Help Obesity-Prevention Efforts

Follow-up activities to an expert meeting on ways to accelerate progress on nutrition/food policy

SUMMARY

Project staff at the [Berkeley Media Studies Group](#) explored how to accelerate public health efforts to prevent obesity by:

- Convening two meetings of public health researchers and advocates to discuss how lessons learned from public health campaigns to reduce harm from tobacco, alcohol, automobile crashes and firearms could be applied to prevent obesity.
- Producing a final report on the recommendations and findings generated from meeting participants. The report is available free of charge [online](#).

The Berkeley Media Studies Group is a project of the independent, nonprofit [Public Health Institute](#). The group uses media strategies to promote public health policies.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) partially funded this *solicited* project from 2003 to 2005 with a total of \$192,000 in two grants to the Public Health Institute.

THE PROBLEM

Some 30 percent of U.S. adults aged 20 years and older—more than 60 million people—are obese, according to the 1999–2002 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey from the National Center for Health Statistics. Obesity can lead to serious diseases including heart disease, certain cancers and diabetes.

According to the project director, over the years, public health advocates have fought difficult battles and learned hard lessons about the need to shift the terms of debate about public health campaigns away from interventions aimed solely at changing individuals' behavior to those affecting the environments in which individual behaviors take place.

However, past efforts at obesity prevention and control—mainly ineffective—have tended to focus on individual behavior change.

However, other public health disciplines—tobacco control, alcohol control, traffic safety and firearm injury prevention—have developed efforts to implement environmental and policy changes that have helped improve health outcomes.

THE PROJECT

The purpose of the first grant (ID# 049560) was to determine how research and advocacy used in tobacco-control and other public health campaigns could be applied to obesity prevention.

Funds under this grant supported a first meeting on January 8–9, 2004 in Princeton, N.J. Project staff brought together approximately 30 researchers, funders and advocates from tobacco control, alcohol control, traffic safety and firearm injury prevention. These attendees were seasoned at framing controversial or emerging public health problems in terms of environmental and policy interventions more likely to protect broad populations. Project staff asked them to identify which strategies were most successful in their respective areas of public health.

The California Endowment provided \$35,000 toward this meeting.

Before the meeting, four of the participants drafted memos and distributed them to all those planning to attend.

- Three memos covered the history of public health efforts to reduce harm from (1) tobacco, (2) alcohol and (3) guns and how lessons learned from those advocacy movements could be applied to improve food and nutrition policy.
- The fourth memo presented possible policy and environmental strategies to reduce obesity and included legal and public opinions about various strategies. The memos are posted [online](#).

According to the project director, the first meeting was successful in bringing together key leaders from various fields of public health and engaging them in a debate about effective strategies for obesity prevention and control. But participants raised a question there was not enough time to resolve at the meeting—how to build an infrastructure, including leadership development and communications, to foster an organized movement to prevent and reduce obesity.

As a result, the project director requested and received additional funds from RWJF to convene a second meeting (ID# 051287). It was held October 7–8, 2004, in Berkeley, Calif. Some 24 participants attended the meeting, including people from the fields of

obesity, tobacco and firearm injury prevention, and control and traffic safety. The California Endowment also provided funds for this meeting, in the amount of \$20,000.

Before the second meeting, project staff distributed the four memos circulated before the first meeting, with the addition of a fifth memo addressing lessons learned from traffic safety campaigns (also available [online](#)).

After the second meeting, project staff produced a final report entitled *Accelerating Policy on Nutrition: Lessons from Tobacco, Alcohol, Firearms and Traffic Safety* that they distributed to participants, other professionals in the field and upon request. The report includes recommendations on how to hasten progress on obesity prevention by addressing four major areas:

- policy goals
- framing the issues
- seizing political opportunities
- garnering resources to achieve the goals.

The report is available free of charge [online](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The proceedings included the following recommendations for obesity prevention:

- **Focus on prevention, as opposed to treatment, and concentrate efforts on changing environments, not only individual behavior.** According to the project director, lessons learned from other public health disciplines indicate that success will not result from relying solely on coaxing individuals to change their behavior, but rather from prevention efforts that change conditions for the population at large.
- **Be prepared to take advantage of political opportunities.** Advocates need to recognize opportunities and be prepared to act on those opportunities to affect policy change. For example, this may mean exploiting food industry missteps—such as junk food advertising targeted at children—or working in seriously affected communities on issues of local concern, such as the location of a fast food outlet or access to a supermarket.
- **Seize control of the terms of obesity prevention debate and frame the debate in public health terms.** Advocates must understand how the obesity issue is still discussed and transform that discussion to include terms and solutions that they are seeking. For example, advocates should focus the debate on the environment that affects obesity—the offerings in school cafeterias and vending machines, the availability of parks and playgrounds, for example—so that individual eating habits and activity can be understood in the appropriate context.

- **Adequate resources are essential to supporting a viable obesity prevention movement.** Advocates must have the financial resources in place to support an obesity prevention movement. Key resource investments should focus on building infrastructure—the tools and support systems for advocates, conducting research independent from the food industry and cultivating leadership to take on risk.

AFTERWARD

In January 2005, RWJF awarded an 11-month grant in the amount of \$175,798 to the project director to draft a plan for building an advocacy infrastructure for obesity prevention advocacy (ID# 052620). The plan, which is based on the recommendations from the meetings and additional interviews and research, will seek to:

- Address what role philanthropies can take to address the problem.
- Recommend a structure for building an obesity prevention movement.
- Provide suggestions on how to take advantage of political opportunities.

Additionally, on December 14, 2005, the project director presented key recommendations from the meetings at the American Public Health Association's annual meeting in Philadelphia.

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(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

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