



## A Faith-Led Effort to Combat Childhood Obesity in Oregon

Developing and promoting a model congregational wellness policy

### SUMMARY

From 2008 to 2010, staff at Portland, Ore.-based [Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon](#)—a statewide association of Christian denominations—built and engaged two coalitions—in Portland and Corvallis—of faith communities, government agencies, advocacy groups and others to improve the health of congregations and their communities.

This project was in response to a solicitation for proposals from an initiative of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), entitled [Faith-Based Advocacy: Galvanizing Communities to End Childhood Obesity](#), which supports faith-based coalitions to advance community policies and environmental changes that improve access to healthy foods and/or opportunities for physical activity. See the [Galvanizing Communities Web site](#) for more information. Also see the solicitation's [introduction](#).

### Results

The project team reported the following results to RWJF:

- Coalition members reached out to congregations, particularly in low-income and racially and ethnically diverse communities, and helped them create wellness teams—small groups of congregants to lead the work within each congregation. The wellness teams guided congregations in conducting diet and physical activity assessments, in developing guidelines for eating and exercise and in activities such as creating vegetable gardens and installing bicycle racks on church property.
- The project team created the Congregational Health Index, which includes a survey tool and step-by-step guide to help congregations discover opportunities and challenges for improving the health of their members through diet and exercise. Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon subcontracted with the Portland-based health advocacy organization [Oregon Public Health Institute](#) for assistance in creating the tool, using the tool and piloting its further use in seven faith communities. Modeled after the School Health Index developed by the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC), the tool can be adapted for different approaches and cultures. It is available [online](#).

- Use of the Congregational Health Index led to a range of initiatives at pilot site faith communities. For example,
  - A church in Portland that also runs a parish school de-paved a large portion of its parking lot and established a community garden where students learn about nutrition. Another Portland church incorporated movement into religious education and organized active games for children during fellowship gatherings.
  - In Corvallis, one church started open gym times for Latino families and purchased sports equipment. Another church hosts a weekly "Tuesday Club" for children from low-income families who receive a nutritious meal and food to bring home.
- With assistance from its subcontractor, Oregon Public Health Institute, project staff developed a Congregational Wellness Pledge to help congregations make a more conscious commitment to wellness.

Staff had planned to develop a model congregational wellness policy that would be more comprehensive and entail more commitment than a pledge. However, most congregations felt they were not ready to make the move to policy. The Congregational Wellness Pledge serves as a bridge step to policy creation.

- The Portland coalition advocated for local, state and national policies to improve diet and physical exercise levels. For example, they:
  - Held a public discussion with a city commissioner on a potential parks and recreation bond and explored other ways to advocate for parks and public sites for physical activity
  - Joined other organizations to urge the local school district not to adopt a proposal to cut costs by replacing professional physical education instructors with minimally trained instructors. The district took the proposal off the table.
- The project team created a [Web site](#) that provides an overview of the project, its resources and news. The team also produced seven fact sheets on topics related to healthy eating and physical activity, all of which are available online. See the [Bibliography](#) for details.

## Lessons Learned

1. Begin with an assessment in order to create a favorable environment for change. The pilot assessments conducted by the coalition early in the project led to important conversations and built awareness among congregations. Assessment also helped congregations base decisions on data, creating the objectivity needed to move things forward. (Project Co-Director Jenny Holmes)

2. Be willing to shift gears when an approach is not working in order to keep moving forward while respecting participants' goals. For example, the idea of developing a wellness pledge as a precursor to policy helped plant the seed for increased commitment in the future. (Project Co-Director Holmes)
3. Maintain a level of personal choice for congregational members when trying to create broad changes. Making the environment healthier in a number of ways—but leaving beloved traditions in place—seemed to work best. If there is too much resistance, change will not be possible. (Project Co-Director Holmes)
4. Create wellness teams to lead the work in each congregation. "We saw that having a wellness team of even just two or three people made such a difference in congregations' ability to stick with the work when people were resistant to change or to open discussions about wellness," notes Holmes.

## Funding

RWJF supported this project through a grant of \$224,967 as part of its Faith-Based Advocacy targeted solicitation. Additional funding included a grant of \$100,000 from Providence Partners in Health and a contract (\$64,167) from the CDC's Communities Putting Prevention to Work program.

## Afterward

As of April 2011, the project team was using remaining funds from Providence Partners in Health and Communities Putting Prevention to Work to continue helping congregations improve the health and wellness of their members. The team is seeking additional funds to carry on with the project after the funding ends.

Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon hired two new staff members (funded through April 2011) to help strengthen the coalition in Corvallis.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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

### Reports

#### Fact Sheets

*Guidelines for Healthy Fellowship Food in Faith Communities.* Ainsworth United Church of Christ, March 2010. Available [online](#).

*Outline for New Congregational Health Index Users Wanting to Orient Their Congregations.* Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, August 2010. Available [online](#).

*Obesity Fact Sheet.* Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, August 2010. Available [online](#).

*Congregational Wellness Pledge.* Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, August 2010. Available [online](#).

*Keep Your Family and Your Faith Community Moving.* Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, December 2010. Available [online](#).

*Quick Tips for Healthy Eating.* Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, December 2010. Available [online](#).

*Tips for Feeding Finicky Eaters.* Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, December 2010. Available [online](#).

### Education or Toolkits

#### Evaluation Tools

*Congregational Health Index: A Self Assessment and Planning Guide.* Portland, OR: Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon and Oregon Public Health Institute, 2010. Available [online](#).

### Communication or Promotion

#### Grantee Web sites

[www.faihandwellness.org](http://www.faihandwellness.org). The project site provides an overview of the project, resources and news. Portland, OR: Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon.