



Faith & Food

Cincinnati churches advocating for healthy food access policies

SUMMARY

From December 2008 through November 2010, [The Center for Closing the Health Gap in Greater Cincinnati](#), in partnership with three Avondale neighborhood churches, conducted the Faith & Food Project. The project mobilized a faith-based coalition to advance policies that improve the availability of healthy, affordable foods in Cincinnati's Avondale neighborhood. Partner churches are:

- Carmel Presbyterian Church
- Greater New Hope Missionary Baptist Church
- Southern Baptist Church

Founded by former Cincinnati Mayor Dwight Tillery, the center works to eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities in Greater Cincinnati through advocacy, education and community outreach.

Context

In May 2008, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) childhood obesity team issued a call for proposals for "[Faith-Based Advocacy: Galvanizing Communities to End Childhood Obesity](#)" to advance community policies or environmental changes that improve access to healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity. Also see the [Introduction](#). RWJF funded 21 projects to support policy efforts and to learn about supporting faith-based advocacy.

RWJF staff was particularly interested in efforts that reach children at greater risk for childhood obesity, including Black, Latino, American Indian, Asian-American and Pacific Islander children and children who live in low-income communities or communities with limited access to affordable healthy foods and safe opportunities for physical activity.

Results

During the project, the center and coalition:

- Conducted a community food assessment. The center trained 22 community residents to research the availability of fresh, healthy foods¹ at 21 food outlets in the Avondale neighborhood (12 fast-food or takeout restaurants, six convenience/general goods stores and three neighborhood markets). Researchers also rated the cleanliness and perceived safety of each food outlet.
 - The three neighborhood markets offered the highest percentage of healthy foods, but only one of the three stocked more than 50 percent of the recommended healthy foods.
 - Among the fast-food and takeout restaurants, only two of the 12 offered at least 30 percent of the recommended healthy foods and only one of the six convenience/general goods stores met this relatively low standard.
 - The majority of the food outlets were rated clean and safe.
- Surveyed 683 people on their food shopping experiences during the 6th Annual Health Expo in April 2009. Respondents reported on types of stores visited and frequency of visits and gave suggestions for increasing access to healthy foods.
 - Overall, 76 percent of the respondents shop for groceries at a full service store; 54 percent were satisfied with the store they shop in. The majority of respondents (84%) use their own vehicle to get to the store. More than half (54%) stated there were other stores in their neighborhood where they could shop but chose not to because of the quality and type of food available, quality of service and cost of food.
 - Respondents offered these suggestions for increasing access to healthy foods in the community:
 - Provide shuttles to grocery stores.
 - Encourage large chain grocery stores to operate in the inner city.
 - Build community gardens.
 - Provide grocery delivery services.
 - Reduce prices at existing stores.

¹ For the purpose of the survey, staff defined "healthy foods" as recommended options from the food groups within the United States Department of Agriculture's food pyramid.

- Led a 14-member Food Access Task Force, established by the Cincinnati City Council; the project director for the RWJF grant was one of the co-chairs of the task force. The task force:
 - Assessed the needs of low-income communities related to the disparity in access to healthy foods.
 - Identified seven innovative solutions and national best practices being used to address the problem.
 - Submitted *A Report From City of Cincinnati Food Access Task Force* to the city council on September 1, 2009; it contains policy recommendations about redressing disparities in access to healthy food. See the [Bibliography](#).
- Trained 14 faith leaders on childhood obesity and food access issues. The leaders formed a committee to address food access policies within their churches and in the Avondale community.
 - Based on the training the coalition developed an advocacy curriculum for the Center's Health Leadership Institute for Faith-Based Organizations.
- Trained six laypersons from the three partner churches to conduct 10 workshops in their churches on childhood obesity and access to healthy foods. Some 110 people participated in the workshops. Following the workshops participants reported that obesity was an issue for their family (60%) and they had an increased understanding of childhood obesity (57%).
- Held a press conference on June 3, 2009, to raise awareness of the lack of fresh foods in the Avondale community; three local news stations covered the story.
- Designated June 7, 2009, as Childhood Obesity Awareness Day. Pastors from 14 coalition churches offered a sermon on food access issues and included information in church bulletins. This information was made available to all 52 churches in the Avondale community.
- Planted and managed community gardens and farmers markets to bring awareness of food access issues in Avondale. Some 20 teenagers received garden/nutrition training, managed two gardens and sold the produce at farmers' markets throughout the summer.
- Held a march and rally for the community's health in October 2009. More than 500 people attended this community awareness event and 250 participants signed up to become health advocates to develop and implement policy change through churches and schools.
- Hosted "Are We Feeding our Kids to Death?" a child obesity summit on April 3, 2010. More than 300 people attended, including community residents, faith leaders, parents, community leaders and community organizations.

- Panel participants included two pediatricians, an NFL player, state Senator Eric Kearney, a parent and the RWJF consultant on the solicitation Onjewel Smith.
- Made two national presentations about the project:
 - African American Collaborative Obesity Research Network 4th Annual Invited Workshop, Philadelphia, August 2010
 - American Public Health Association Annual Meeting and Exposition, Denver, November 2010

Lessons Learned

1. **Get input from the faith community rather than asking them to sign up for your "project."** The center used this approach, which helped to empower volunteers and maintain their buy-in. Community residents felt engaged in the project and therefore were committed to making sure Faith & Food met its goals. (Project Director/Renee Mahaffey Harris).

Funding

RWJF provided a grant of \$225,000 for the project.

Afterward

With \$625,000 in funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [Communities Putting Prevention to Work](#) program, in partnership with Hamilton County Public Health Department, the center increased the number of coalition churches from 14 to 30. The center is using a train-the-trainer model to build the capacity of churches to offer wellness ministries to residents through gardening, healthy cooking classes and physical activity sessions. There are now eight church gardens supplying fresh produce to the three community farmers markets.

RWJF provided the center a \$40,000 grant in April 2011 to work in consultation with the [Food Trust](#) to develop a citywide strategy for improving fresh food access in Cincinnati. The Food Trust, based in Philadelphia, works to improve the health of children and adults, promote good nutrition, increase access to nutritious foods and advocate for better public policy.

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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.)

Report

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