

An Action Agenda for Schools and Communities to Fight Obesity

Town hall meetings on childhood obesity and related local projects

SUMMARY

During 2006–2007, the Smiley Group in Los Angeles—led by Tavis Smiley, host of a late-night public television talk show, and a radio show on Public Radio International—convened town hall meetings in four U.S. cities to raise awareness of the rise of childhood obesity, particularly among high-risk youth. A key organization in each city then added childhood obesity to its action agenda and worked to spur local and state efforts to address it.

Key Results

- The Smiley Group convened four town hall meetings on "Eliminating Childhood Obesity: Best Practices for Communities and Schools" in Atlanta; Baltimore; Los Angeles; and Oakland, Calif., each attended by some 1,000 people.
- Philanthropic Collaborative for a Healthy Georgia, in Atlanta, pursued a statewide strategy to inform policy-makers and residents about the Georgia Youth Fitness Assessment and trained residents to promote programs and policies that support physical activity and good nutrition among Georgia youth.
- Associated Black Charities, in Baltimore, working with the Association of Baltimore
 Area Grantmakers, developed and pursued an action plan to halt a rise in childhood
 obesity.
- California Center for Public Health Advocacy, in Los Angeles, worked to ensure that
 a 10-year downtown development project for nearby Baldwin Park, a majority-Latino
 city, promoted smart growth, active living, and healthy eating.
- East Bay Asian Youth Center, in Oakland, Calif., advanced the Oakland Schoolyards
 Initiative, designed to transform elementary and middle school schoolyards into
 vibrant spaces for physical activity for children, youth, and families.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) supported this work with a \$400,000 grant to the Smiley Group, Inc. from December 2005 through November 2006 (ID# 56012) and a grant to 9th Sign Communications to help organize the town hall meetings (ID# 61839). RWJF also awarded four grants to organizations in the four cities.

They included Georgia State University Research Foundation, Inc., Atlanta, which served as fiscal agent for the Philanthropic Collaborative for a Healthy Georgia (ID# 59074; \$100,000, January 2007 through May 2008); Associated Black Charities, Inc., Baltimore (ID# 59074; \$101,192, January 2007 through May 2008); California Center for Public Health Advocacy, Los Angeles, (ID# 62552; \$100,000, December 2007 through June 2009); and East Bay Asian Youth Center, Oakland (ID# 63108; \$95,200, November 2007 through October 2008; and ID# 65105; \$75,000, October 2008 through March 2010).

CONTEXT

Obesity rates have more than doubled among children ages 2–5, and more than tripled among those ages 6–11 over the past three decades. In 2004 in *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) reported that some 9 million children over age 6 are obese.

Low-income African-American and Latino children are among those at highest risk. Children who are overweight or clinically obese can develop hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and other life-threatening diseases. The report examined those and other consequences, and provided recommendations for promoting healthy weight among children and youth.

RWJF's Interest in This Area

These grants were part of RWJF's broad goal of reversing the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015 by changing public policies and community environments to promote improved nutrition and increased physical activity in schools and communities across the nation.

THE PROJECT

To raise awareness of childhood obesity and the IOM's recommended response, the Smiley Group and RWJF partnered to host town hall meetings in four U.S. cities in 2006 and 2007. The meetings were part of Tavis Smiley's multicity Road to Health tour, which featured two-day fitness and wellness expos designed to encourage healthy living in African American and Latino communities.

"This project was an opportunity for us to get a pundit like Tavis Smiley to really talk about the issue," said Vanessa Farrell, RWJF program officer. "Our goal was also to get this issue on the action agenda of influential agencies and organizations in these cities.

"A town hall meeting gave us an opportunity to not only present potential solutions for preventing childhood obesity—such as environmental and policy changes—but also to...encourage people in communities to talk openly and freely about the health issues that affect them on a very personal level," added Dwayne Proctor, PhD, RWJF senior program officer and director of the Childhood Obesity Program Management team.

As part of the outreach and follow-up efforts after the town meetings, a local organization in each city received RWJF funding to tackle childhood obesity.

RESULTS

According to final reports and interviews with the project director for the Smiley Group and RWJF program officers, the projects accomplished these results:

In 2006 and 2007, the Smiley Group convened four town hall meetings on "Eliminating Childhood Obesity: Best Practices for Communities and Schools," to kick off Road to Health expos in Atlanta; Baltimore; Los Angeles; and Oakland, Calif. Some 1,000 residents and officials attended each meeting, which included panels composed of local and national leaders as well as information on childhood obesity provided by local organizations. The Baltimore meeting included a video welcome by former President Bill Clinton; David Satcher, MD, former US surgeon general, was a panelist at the Atlanta meeting. (See the Appendix for panelists at each meeting.)

"What was great about the town hall meetings was that they were very interactive," RWJF's Farrell said. "People were able to ask questions of the panelists and of Tavis Smiley. He was also very provocative in engaging the panelists." A clip from the Atlanta meeting is available online.

The meetings also introduced the organizations receiving the RWJF follow-up grants, to enable participants connect with them, according to Denise Pines, a consultant for the Smiley Group. A project website (no longer active) included information on the town hall meetings and the organizations, as well as resources on childhood obesity.

• During 2007–2008, the Philanthropic Collaborative for a Healthy Georgia, in Atlanta, pursued a statewide strategy to inform policy-makers and residents about the Georgia Youth Fitness Assessment, and trained residents to promote programs and policies that support physical activity and good nutrition among Georgia youth.

In 2006, the collaborative had partnered with the state to conduct the assessment, which gathered information on the health and fitness of 5,200 5th and 7th graders in 100 public and private schools. Through the RWJF project, the collaborative:

- Developed and disseminated the report Georgia Youth Fitness Assessment: State
 Commitment to Promote Fitness to legislators, state and local officials,
 community-based organizations, schools, and parents, and sent a policy brief to
 all state legislators
- Convened a meeting of the Georgia Coalition for Physical Activity and Nutrition, which brought together 150 decision-makers to decide how to respond to the assessment
- Convened seven community meetings around the state to develop a strategy for urging state and local officials to combat childhood obesity, with an average attendance of 50
- Conducted five sessions to train citizens on being effective advocates for changing state and local policies to promote physical activity and good nutrition, each attended by nearly 100 people. Project leaders also developed the "Georgia Youth Fitness Assessment: Strategic Communications to Promote Fitness in Georgia," a community action kit.
- Met with key state legislative caucuses and committees, including the Georgia Senate Study Committee on Diabetes and Childhood Obesity, and the Georgia House Health and Human Services Committee, as well as advocacy groups, to discuss responding to the assessment
- In 2007–2008, Associated Black Charities, working with the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers, developed and pursued an action plan to halt a rise in childhood obesity rates in Baltimore. A high percentage of the city's children live in deteriorating neighborhoods with unsafe streets, inadequate play areas, and few outlets for healthy food. In response, project staff:
 - Commissioned Childhood Obesity in Baltimore City: Assessment and Recommendations to the Baltimore City Health Commissioner, a report that provides baseline information on childhood obesity in Baltimore; highlights its physical, emotional, and economic effects; outlines risk factors; and recommends interventions
 - Engaged the National Center for Health Behavioral Change to examine best practices and lessons learned in preventing and treating childhood obesity. Project leaders shared the findings with universities and health care organizations, community and faith-based organizations, and schools and youth organizations.

¹ The Kaiser Foundation Health Plan of the Mid-Atlantic States, Inc. provided a \$25,000 grant to help underwrite the cost of a community summit.

- Formed a community council to address childhood obesity, composed of representatives from more than 60 public- and private-sector organizations
- Developed the Baltimore Blueprint for Healthy Outcomes in Children:
 Addressing Childhood Obesity, a plan to expand access to physical activity and healthy, affordable food among Baltimore children, and disseminated the blueprint to 750 organizations and policy-makers
- Hosted "Eat Right, Get Moving," a community summit in April 2008, attended by nearly 500 Baltimore residents
- In 2007–2008, the California Center for Public Advocacy worked to ensure that Baldwin Park's 10-year downtown development project promoted smart growth, active living, and healthy eating. Four-fifths of the residents of Baldwin Park, a medium-sized city near Los Angeles, are low-income Latinos. The center collaborated with the Resident Advisory Committee of Baldwin Park Healthy Eating, Active Communities² on this project:
 - The partners commissioned a national expert to train some 25 Baldwin Park residents in smart growth, walkability, and zoning ordinances.
 - Those residents and project leaders then met with city leaders, business owners, and developers to promote their priorities for the redevelopment project.
 - As a result, the redevelopment plan included four key priorities: a full-service grocery store, walking paths, bike trails and racks, and public ownership of open space.
- In 2007–2010, the East Bay Asian Youth Center advanced the Oakland Schoolyards Initiative, designed to transform elementary and middle school schoolyards into vibrant spaces for physical activity for children, youth, and families. The center had developed the initiative because schoolyards and adjacent playing fields in the city were deteriorating, overcrowded, and sometimes completely inappropriate for use by youth. As part of this work:
 - The Oakland Board of Education passed a resolution making the Oakland Unified School District a formal partner of the Oakland Schoolyards Initiative, enabling senior managers to participate in it.
 - Project participants engaged stakeholders in creating a schoolyard improvement plan for the Manzanita Community School, and secured \$200,000 from the Stewardship Council to complete it, as well as the Urban Promise Academy Schoolyard Improvement Plan.

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² Baldwin Park Healthy Eating, Active Communities is part of an initiative funded by the California Endowment to reduce disparities in obesity and diabetes by improving the food and physical activity environments for school-aged children in low-income communities.

- Project leaders identified four schools scheduled for renovation as high priorities for the Oakland Schoolyard Initiative, and selected five other schools for schoolyard improvement planning.
- Project leaders secured \$800,000 from public agencies and private foundations to create and implement schoolyard improvement plans for those nine schools.

AFTERWARD

Leaders and residents in the four communities are continuing to promote policies and programs to combat childhood obesity. The California Center for Public Advocacy and the East Bay Asian Youth Center are now part of *Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities*, an RWJF national program that advances policy and environmental changes designed to promote active living and healthy eating. According to RWJF's Proctor, David Kakishiba, the executive director of the East Bay Asian Youth Center, is now a leading national figure among educators and activists.

Prepared by: Susan Parker

Reviewed by: Sandra Hackman, Karyn Feiden and Molly McKaughan

Program Officers: Dwayne Proctor and Vanessa Farrell Grant ID#s 56012, 59074, 59700, 62552, 63108, 65105

Program area: Childhood Obesity

APPENDIX

Panelists at the Town Hall Meetings

Panelists at the Atlanta meeting, held August 4, 2006, included:

- David Satcher, MD, PhD, Morehouse School of Medicine
- William Dietz, MD, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Jim Gavin, III, MD, PhD, RWJF Board of Trustees
- Donna Richard Joyner, fitness expert
- Liany Elba Arroyo, National Council of La Raza

Panelists at the Baltimore meeting, held September 22, 2006, included:

- President Bill Clinton, Clinton Foundation (who introduced the meeting via videoconference)
- Betty Cortina, Latina magazine
- Jackie Joyner-Kersee, Jackie Joyner-Kersee Foundation
- Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, M.D, MBA, Chief Executive Officer, RWJF
- Marc Morial, National Urban League

Panelists at the Los Angeles meeting, held March 30, 2007, included:

- Dwayne Proctor, PhD, RWJF
- Diana M. Bonta, RN, Kaiser Permanente
- Robert Ross, MD, California Endowment
- Antronette Yancey, MD, MPH, UCLA School of Public Health
- Martin Gonzalez, California School Boards Association

Panelists at the Oakland, Calif., meeting, held May 11, 2007, included:

- LaTasha Seliby, former Miss Oakland
- Bernard Tyson, Kaiser Permanente
- Eileen Espejo, Children & the Media
- Arnell Hinkle, California Adolescent Nutrition and Fitness Program
- Donna Richardson, fitness expert