Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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National Urban League Tackles Childhood Obesity

Reversing childhood obesity in communities of color through increased public awareness and promoting federal policies

SUMMARY

In 2010, the National Urban League launched an initiative to address childhood obesity through policy and program activities both on the national level and through its local affiliates.

The National Urban League was founded in 1910 as a civil rights organization dedicated to empowering Blacks and other minorities to enter the social and economic mainstream. It provides direct services to 2.8 million people annually through its nearly 100 affiliates. It also maintains public policy, advocacy and communications efforts.

The National Urban League Policy Institute established a new position, Education and Health Policy, to address childhood obesity in communities of color and hired Jacqueline C. Ayers, JD, to communicate the organization's positions before national organizations, policy-makers and Urban League affiliates. The policy institute developed a research and advocacy agenda and disseminated information to its affiliates through:

- Regular telephone and email communications
- Publications and Web-based materials
- Conferences and other leadership activities

Context

Childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions in America and is disproportionally prevalent in low-income communities and communities of color. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is committed to preventing childhood obesity and the threat it poses to the children who are most affected. See the team's strategy statement on the Foundation's website. RWJF's Childhood Obesity team sought proposals from national organizations serving low-income communities and communities of color to incorporate childhood obesity prevention into their national health agendas. The National Urban League was one of the organizations whose proposal was selected.

Key Results

Project Director Ayers reported the following key project results:

- The Urban League added a section to its website devoted to childhood obesity prevention. The section includes news and links to publications, including four fact sheets covering:
  - Facts about childhood obesity
  - Healthy diet and nutrition
  - Tips for healthy families
  - What young adults can do
- The league highlighted the issue of childhood obesity in its publications, including President and CEO Marc H. Morial's "To Be Equal" column and "ReMarc's" newsletter:
  - December 2010 column, "Holiday Grinch in Black America"
  - November 2011 announcement of Healthy Kids Out of School in "ReMarc's."
- The league also highlighted the issue of childhood obesity in its annual *The State of Black America* report:
  - The 2010 report included data on childhood obesity in its Equality Index.
  - The 2011 report featured an article by First Lady Michelle Obama titled, "Healthy Schools."
  - The 2012 report included a special section, "Partnering to Empower Healthy Kids," with essays by leaders of the Boy Scouts of America and the Girl Scouts of America.
- The league added the issue of childhood obesity prevention to the agenda of its national conferences and events:
  - Ian K. Smith, MD, spoke to more than 300 high school students at the 2011 National Urban League Youth Summit about the importance of a healthful diet and exercise.
  - The 2010 centennial conference had a full workshop devoted to obesity in the Black community.
  - A dinner among Urban League CEOs at the 2011 Legislative and Policy Conference discussed childhood obesity advocacy at the local level.
- The league participated in the Healthy Kids Out of School initiative, led by the RWJF-supported ChildObesity180: Reverse the Trend program. Participating

organizations in Healthy Kids Out of School developed a set of principles to guide all out-of-school-time programs:

- Drink Right: Choose water instead of sugar-sweetened beverages
- Move More: Boost movement and physical activity in all programs
- Snack Smart: Fuel up on fruits and vegetables

Several Urban League affiliates participated in focus groups at the league's 2011 Whitney M. Young Leadership Development Conference to provide feedback on these principles.

- The league participated in national conferences and coalitions relating to childhood obesity:
  - Southern Obesity Summit in Nashville, Tenn.
  - Biennial Childhood Obesity Conference in Washington D.C.
  - Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies 2011 Place Matters Conference
  - The Food Marketing Workgroup led by Center for Science in the Public Interest
- Local affiliates developed projects to promote childhood obesity prevention in their own communities. For example:
  - The Chattanooga, Tenn., affiliate developed materials to share best practices and information about their local community gardens and youth fitness programs.
  - The Lorain County Urban League in Elyria, Ohio, launched a pilot project called Save Our Sons which encouraged healthier eating and living habits among men. It was subsequently expanded to include 200 women and children with obesity problems.
  - The Louisville Urban League hosted a Walk to Defeat Childhood Obesity to bring awareness to the growing epidemic in Kentucky.
  - The league developed a health task force comprised of CEOs engaged in health activities and a health Google group for affiliates to easily share their updates and events with one another.
- The league collected more than 2,300 signatures on an online petition urging the U.S. Department of Agriculture to adopt new nutrition standards for school lunches, as authorized by the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. The league was the only civil rights group in a coalition of organizations working on this issue. Other partners in the coalition included the American Heart Association and the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Lessons Learned

Ayers offered the following lessons to RWJF:

1. Establish a method to measure impacts at the onset of a project. It was only late in the grant period that the National Urban League Policy Institute added a communications staffer responsible for quantifying project impact. As a result, the project did not fully document media impressions and outreach.

2. Use in-person meetings for effective peer learning. In-person meetings followed by ongoing communication with trainers result in the exchange of more information about programs and best practices than learning techniques with no in-person contact.

Funding

RWJF provided a $395,841 grant to the National Urban League from December 2009 through March 2012.

Afterward

The National Urban League Policy Institute's Education and Health Policy Division continues to monitor and promote efforts to prevent childhood obesity. "Through the RWJF grant, the National Urban League became a national voice for childhood obesity prevention," Project Director Ayers said.

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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.)

Communications or Promotions

Grantee Website

http://iamempowered.com/get-empowered/health-lifestyle/childhood-obesity. News and links to fact sheets and other publications about childhood obesity prevention. New York: National Urban League.