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ADVOCACY TO REVERSE CHILDHOOD OBESITY

Why Use It?

The Obesity Challenge

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity is committed to supporting advocates in their efforts to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic. Childhood obesity remains an issue of enormous social impact, which is exacerbated by racial and economic disparities. Children of color are more likely to be poor and live in unsafe communities that typically have fewer supermarkets and more fast food chains and liquor outlets – all environmental factors that are associated with reduced physical activity, poor nutrition, higher rates of obesity and other adverse health outcomes.¹

Why Childhood Obesity Advocacy?

The epidemic of obesity in the United States is finally gaining the national attention it deserves, but reducing overweight and obesity is an unusually complex challenge for practitioners and advocates. There are a multitude of dimensions that contribute to today's obesity rates – ranging from disparities in access to healthy food and physical activity opportunities, to targeted marketing practices. Fast food restaurants alone spend \$520 million in marketing to children – incentivizing the sale of 1.2 billion meals with toys to children.² These powerful social and economic drivers can discourage some people and organizations from making changes to the status quo. To counter these dominant forces, informed parents, clinicians, community members, policymakers, and others need a strategic plan to advocate for health promoting policies and environments.

Obesity Advocacy Strategies

Addressing the issue of childhood obesity requires an advocacy strategy designed to change policies and environments at the local, state and federal levels; along with a focus on regulating industry practices. Also imperative to this work is an effective community-wide outreach plan that will engage and support capacity in low-income communities and communities of color so advocacy campaigns accurately reflect the needs identified by the people who are most impacted by the epidemic.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity focuses on six policy priorities that evidence suggests will have the greatest and longest-lasting impact on children. These priorities, which can be advanced through numerous approaches, include:

- 1. Ensure that all foods and beverages served and sold in schools meet or exceed the most recent Dietary Guidelines for Americans.**
- 2. Increase access to high-quality, affordable foods through new or improved grocery stores and healthier corner stores and bodegas.**
- 3. Increase the time, intensity and duration of physical activity during the school day and out-of-school programs.**

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- 4. Increase physical activity by improving the built environment in communities**
- 5. Use pricing strategies—both incentives and disincentives—to promote the purchase of healthier foods.**
- 6. Reduce youths' exposure to the marketing of unhealthy foods through regulation, policy and effective industry self-regulation.**

Visit the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [website](#) to learn more about these strategies and policy priorities to reverse childhood obesity.

Advocates can be effective agents for change at any level - national, state, local or institutional. The following are examples of how advocacy can transform policies in a variety of settings.

Federal Advocacy

Through agriculture, nutrition and other policies and programs, the federal government wields enormous influence over the foods we eat and beverages we drink. By adjusting these and other policies, the federal government can help create and maintain environments where all children and their families can access affordable, healthy foods and beverages. For example, the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act was signed into law in December 2010, and serves to significantly improve the nutritional quality of foods served to children in schools. The effort to pass this bill brought together thousands of organizations at the national, state, and local levels, and millions of advocates across the country that were concerned about child obesity and hunger.

State Advocacy

While some policy approaches fall largely under federal jurisdiction, others are shared with state government. There are many opportunities to become an advocate at the state level to help create and ensure food and physical activity environments support active healthy living. For example, in September 2010, the Governor and Health Commissioner in Tennessee released a five-year statewide nutrition and physical activity plan, which provides a comprehensive roadmap to reduce obesity and chronic disease in the state by 2015. The development of the plan was spearheaded by the Tennessee Obesity Taskforce – a broad-based coalition of policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and advocates.

Local Advocacy

Local policymakers have direct control over many decisions that shape the food and built environments in neighborhoods. Community residents can play an important role in this decision making process. Choices like where to place a school, what kinds of businesses to welcome and how much to invest in public transit can have a significant impact on community health. For example, in the rural central valley community of Pixley, California residents have come together to persuade school officials

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to enter into joint use agreements that have expanded opportunities for community gardening and afterschool physical activity and cultural programs.

Industry Advocacy

Addressing marketing of unhealthy products to children is a fundamental necessity to improve the health of children and communities. Although industries command tremendous power, there are ways for the public to exert influence over their actions. One example is through the Federal Communications Commission, which has convened an industry/advocate Task Force on Media and Childhood Obesity aimed at curbing the strong prevalence of negative industry influence on childhood health.³ Additional strategies for industry focused advocacy efforts can be found in the resource guide.

Whether you are focused on changing policy at the federal, state, local, or industry level, this resource guide contains tools and information that can help strengthen your advocacy efforts.

¹ Andrea Freeman. "Fast Food: Oppression through Poor Nutrition", *California Law Review* 30 (2007): 2221-2259.

² "Marketing Food to Children and Adolescents: A Review of Industry Expenditures, Activities, and Self Regulation," Federal Trade Commission, <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2008/07/P064504foodmktgreport.pdf>, (accessed July, 2011).

³ Children Now: Letter to Chairman Leibowitz, <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2010/12/101220ftcchildrenfood.pdf>, (accessed July, 2011).