

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity

www.reversechildhoodobesity.org

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT RESOURCE GUIDE

Why Use It?

Childhood obesity threatens the health and future productivity of the nation and nowhere is the crisis more urgent than in low-income communities and communities of color. For example, 43 percent of Mexican American children and 39 percent of African American children are overweight or obese, compared with 33 percent of white children¹. The long-term consequences include increased risk for type 2 diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers, arthritis, stroke, sleep disorders, and hypertension². An estimated 300,000 deaths a year may be attributable to obesity³. An overweight adolescent has a 70 to 80 percent chance of becoming an obese adult⁴.

All these numbers add up to one stark fact: Without concerted efforts to reverse the epidemic of childhood obesity, today's generation of young people may be the first in modern history to live sicker and die younger than their parents.

Authentic community engagement is a cornerstone of action to address this crisis.

Although diet and physical activity habits are matters of personal choice, those choices are influenced — and in too many places, limited — by environmental factors. People of color and low-income people have the fewest opportunities to meet official guidelines for physical activity and healthy eating. However, even in communities that lack access to health-promoting resources, community residents have the best understanding of the barriers to healthy living in their neighborhoods, as well as the assets that can be built upon to create healthy communities. Engaging communities in the policy and environmental change process is a prerequisite for creating and implementing policies that are equitable, meaningful, and enduring.

Community Engagement and Opportunities to Promote Child Health

Community engagement advances the very philosophy that must drive anti-obesity initiatives: diverse interests and partners working together toward a common goal. Residents and other grassroots stakeholders recognize implicitly that the complex issues facing their neighborhoods overlap across sectors, specialties, and government funding streams — and solutions should too. Engaged communities can encourage governments to take strategic, comprehensive approaches to obesity prevention work.

A study of Federal Healthy Start Program sites across the United States found that community involvement produced numerous benefits⁵:

- empowered people to change behaviors and improve health outcomes;
- mobilized the community to achieve health-related goals;



- fostered local partnerships that resulted in more comprehensive services and better resources;
- spurred new policies and programs;
- strengthened grassroots civic participation; and
- helped communities address issues of race, class, and culture.

Other research finds that when resources are devoted to community engagement from the earliest stage and throughout the lifetime of a community revitalization project, it is more likely to remain robust and continue after government funding ends⁶.

By informing decision-making and service delivery, engagement can make policies and programs more responsive and sensitive to the needs of the people they serve. Residents understand not only the problems in their communities, but also the strengths and assets that can be capitalized upon to address them.

More broadly, meaningful participation can promote trust, build relationships, teach skills, and empower residents to become advocates for their communities. The environmental improvements necessary to fight obesity — more parks, safer streets, healthy food retail, cleaner air, schools that support fitness and healthy eating —are possible only with strong organizing, mobilization, and staying power. When residents come together around a goal, they get to know one another, feel invested in the betterment of their community, and become determined to fight for changes that improve the lives of all children.

The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP), profiled in this resource guide, illustrates the changes that engagement can inspire. While the region has a history of labor organizing, grassroots engagement in public health issues was novel. By bringing together people and organizations to learn from one another, share resources, and collaborate, CCROPP has been instrumental in building a collective voice and a sense of regional identity, and these have enabled people to organize more effectively to improve local conditions. Residents now see they are not alone in their efforts, and they have confidence that they can achieve their goals.

Community engagement requires community members willing to get involved, and policymakers and institutional leaders committed to bringing diverse community representatives to the table as full participants, and to providing the resources, training, and development opportunities that enable constituents to join, act, lead, and succeed. Authentic community engagement is a time and energy intensive undertaking, but the results can reap significant rewards. When neighbors know one another, when they feel invested in the betterment of their community, and when they feel empowered to raise their voices, they create ways to join together and fight for changes that improve the lives of everyone⁷.

This resource guide provides tools to help community members, advocacy organizations, and policymakers engage in meaningful partnerships with each other in order to improve opportunities for all children and families to lead healthy lives. It offers strategies for conducting community outreach and infusing community needs and perspectives into policy and



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

environmental change initiatives. The resource guide also includes a new tool to help coalitions assess the authenticity of their community engagement process.

¹ Ogden, C.L., Carroll, M.D., Curtin, L.R., et al. "Prevalence of High Body Mass Index in US Children and Adolescents 2007-2008." *JAMA*, 303(3): 242-249, 2010.

² Institute of Medicine Committee on Prevention of Obesity in Children and Youth. *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*. Washington, D.C.: National Academic Press, 2005.

³ http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/fact_consequences.htm.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ PolicyLink, 2000. *Community Involvement in the Federal Healthy Start Program*.

⁶ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/151525.pdf>.

⁷ Bell, J. and Lee, M. *Why Place and Race Matter*. Oakland, CA; PolicyLink, 2011.