

Improving access to healthy foods in family child care settings

Dakota County Public Health Department

In 2005, a report published by the New England Journal of Medicine concluded that, because of obesity, this generation of children could be the first in the history of the United States to live less healthful and shorter lives than their parents. This report, as well as growing national research describing the prevalence of obesity among younger children, caught the attention of the Dakota County Public Health Department, who had also observed growing rates of obesity among young children involved in WIC and Head Start.

At the same time, the research base describing how early interventions can be used to encourage healthy eating behaviors and reduce the risk of obesity was starting to emerge. To determine how to locally address childhood obesity, Dakota County worked with Wilder Research to conduct a series of focus groups with parents and caregivers of preschool children. The results, which described caregiver concerns and barriers to healthy eating, were shared in a community Childhood Obesity Prevention Summit. This event, well-attended by local stakeholders, generated a number of potential strategies to address childhood obesity, including interest in working with licensed family day care providers, who care for a large population of young children in the county.

How did the initiative expand?

Dakota County partnered with the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) and the University of Minnesota to train providers on the *Learning About Nutrition through Activities (LANA)* curriculum which had shown positive results in increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables among young children.

The curriculum was taught to an initial group of providers in the summer of 2008, leading to promising results and generating interest among other providers. Results from this initial pilot were also shared with MDH as they identified recommended interventions for Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) grantees. The final set of recommendations included a nutrition-focused option in child care settings, allowing Dakota County to further expand their work using SHIP funding. This included outreach to other child care centers, ECFE programs in local school districts, and Head Start programs. It also allowed for the addition of an evidenced-based program with a stronger emphasis on physical activity, called *I am Moving I am Learning*. Through 2010, more than 200 child care settings have incorporated policy and practice changes to improve nutrition, physical activity, or both, affecting over 5,000 children each day.

How has the project addressed the needs of different cultural communities?

Despite growing diversity throughout Dakota County, there are few licensed family child care providers who speak languages other than English. Therefore, with this program, primarily English- and Spanish-speaking family child care providers have been trained. Some modifications were made to the curriculum for Spanish providers and all training materials were translated into Spanish. Dakota County is currently partnering with the City of Bloomington's Public Health Department to do more training to reach other cultural communities.

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What lessons learned may be helpful to other communities?

- **Identify funding sources at all stages of initiative planning, implementation, expansion, and maintenance.** The Dakota County Public Health Department strategically identified potential funding streams and opportunities to work in partnership with others to expand their work.
- Funding sources for the initiative have included Fellowship dollars for the program coordinator's early work on the project, County funds, Foundation grants, and State dollars through SHIP.
- **Respond to technical assistance needs and implementation barriers in coordination with other stakeholders.** The cost of fresh produce has been identified as a barrier for home family child care providers. To address this concern, the County has worked with providers to identify ways to better use funding streams for their program to purchase healthier foods. In addition, the County notifies providers of community gardens and farmer's markets in their area, to help increase access to affordable, local produce.
- **Identify opportunities for mutually-rewarding partnerships.** The curriculum training has been given as an option for child care providers, who must receive a certain number of training hours annually. This helps expand the program, while not adding additional time burden for training among participating providers.

What are the next steps for this initiative?

The Dakota County Public Health Department was fortunate to receive SHIP funding to help continue their work in this area. However, new funding sources will be needed if state funding is reduced or discontinued. The County will be exploring options for future training opportunities.

The County is also interested in doing more follow up with providers to better determine whether the curriculum is fully implemented after providers receive training, how it influences fruit and vegetable consumption, and ultimately, whether it can reduce the number of overweight/obese children.

ABOUT THE CURRICULUM

LANA helps children eat more fruits and vegetables by increasing opportunities for tasting and preparing new foods, increasing children's preference for and knowledge of fruits and vegetables, and providing families with information about the program and ways to prepare healthy foods at home. The curriculum can be implemented at low costs, though it can be helpful to assist providers in securing resources or identifying opportunities for them to purchase affordable produce. The curriculum can be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/4fc3t9g>

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