

Partners in Action: Collaborating to Prevent Obesity

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Obesity reached a new high in the public's consciousness in 2004 as obesity rates soared. *Time* magazine declared it "The Year of Obesity," other publications announced, "Scientists still seeking cure for obesity," and the Atkins diet was in full force. That year, King County, located in Washington State's Puget Sound region, formed a broad-based community coalition, the King County Overweight Prevention Initiative, to identify priority action areas to address the county's rising obesity rates.

The value of community coalitions to implement public health interventions has long been recognized, but they are equally effective tools for broad policy development and implementation. Four years after its formation, the Initiative's members, who range from community organizations to elected officials, have demonstrated the effectiveness of a cross-sector coalition for developing and implementing policies to address the systemic barriers to maintaining a healthy weight.

Work across sectors

Initiative partners came together around some common principles:

- Scattered approaches to policy development are not the most effective avenue to change.
- Focus should not be solely on individual behavior but on living and working conditions.
- Local and grassroots involvement is needed to identify and make policy changes at all levels.
- Coalition-building is a proven and necessary method for moving policy agendas.

Photo: Student with her choices from her school's self-serve salad bar.



US Department of Agriculture

The Initiative's power for systems change rests in its rich mix of policy makers, public health practitioners, health advocates, and representatives from community organizations, schools, academia, and government, many from outside the health sector. The people in the frontlines at schools, workplaces, and sites where residents gather have personal experiences and insights into their communities' challenges and strengths. In concert with powerful leadership that reaches across sectors, this coalition can set the stage for implementing change at the policy level.

Support from the King County Board of Health, the County Executive, and Public Health-Seattle & King County leadership brought decision makers to the table who can move policy agendas forward. King County Executive Ron Sims emphasized this support, saying, "Through the King County Overweight Prevention Initiative, we will make sure we design our neighborhoods and create policies that promote healthy living, physical activity, and access to healthy foods."

At the same time, academic researchers from the University of Washington's Center for Obesity Research and Center for Public Health Nutrition bring expertise in program evaluation and in grounding Initiative efforts in evidence-based approaches.

Focus on actions and policies

Bringing so many passionate and knowledgeable people together at Initiative forums generates a wealth of ideas and approaches to eliminate obesity, many more than could be tackled all at

once. Consequently, the Initiative participants identified the most significant areas of action through a priority-setting process.

Policy and action priorities were refined first through the work groups (in the areas of nutrition, physical activity, active community design, and communications) and then through the leadership of members of the King County Board of Health. In 2005, the Board of Health passed a resolution backing a 10-point action plan (see graphic for the points). The plan represented the buy-in from decision makers and set the stage for a wide range of program and policy interventions.

Move ideas to action

Each item in the 10-point plan represents an area in which groups can collaborate and take action. Three examples of actions are:

SCHOOL INITIATIVES. One point in this agenda, for example, is to assist school districts' development and implementation of nutrition and physical activity policies. Along these lines, the Initiative backed the work of King County Steps to Health, which funds staff to work directly with school districts to promote policies, curricula, and norms within schools that improve nutrition and physical activity for all students. Having Steps to Health school coordinators work directly with students and staff within the Seattle, Highline, and Tukwila school districts has resulted in significant improvements, including salad bars in elementary schools, "walking school bus" programs, and staff wellness activities.

WORK-SITE INITIATIVES. Initiative participants and the King County Board of Health support employers' efforts to promote nutrition and physical activity through work-site wellness programs. Guidelines that the Initiative created for healthy food and physical activity at professional meetings included recommendations regarding foods served and guidance on holding meetings in locations where people can walk in order to promote physical activity. The guidelines were first adopted for employees at Public Health - Seattle & King County and then widely shared and replicated, including by the state Department of Health (see the guidelines at www.metrokc.gov/health/nutrition/meetings.htm).

NUTRITION INITIATIVES. Starting in 2006, many participants of the Initiative joined with the Board of Health to study the elimination of trans fat and the addition of nutrition information to menus and menu boards. Trans fat has been linked to increased risk for cardiac disease, and research has shown that point-of-sale information helps consumers make healthier choices. The effort led to groundbreaking regulations, to be implemented

in 2008 and 2009, that require nutrition menu labeling in chain food establishments and the elimination of trans fat countywide.

Set short-term, attainable goals

The King County Board of Health passed a second resolution in 2007 to prioritize short-term goals for the 10-point plan. Among the points in this resolution, the Board placed a high priority on school-based nutrition and physical activity programs, breastfeeding in childcare centers and work-sites, access to parks and recreation,



and active transportation choices. Supporting the implementation of this resolution, Seattle has moved forward with two master plans for pedestrians and bicyclists that promote safety and encourage alternatives to car travel.

The Initiative's successful work so far demonstrates the strength of a diverse and representative coalition. A number of other efforts have also resulted from relationships developed through the Initiative, including a state farm-to-school food policy, recommendations for parks policies that support public health, and an emphasis in the community on using research to inform and shape policies on healthy eating and active living.

By creating synergy and leveraging resources, the Initiative is forging ahead to make the healthy choice the easy choice for residents of King County. ■

Ten-point action plan, King County Overweight Prevention Initiative.

Authors

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Resource

For more information about the King County Overweight Prevention Initiative and related activities and policies, see www.metrokc.gov/health/overweight.