

# Leadership for Healthy Communities



**Advancing Policies to Support  
Healthy Eating and Active Living**



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

# WHO

## Who We Are

Based in Washington, D.C., *Leadership for Healthy Communities* supports local and state government leaders nationwide in their efforts to reduce childhood obesity through public policies that promote active living, healthy eating and access to healthy foods. We focus, in particular, on policy efforts that can improve nutrition and increase physical activity among children at high risk for obesity, especially African-American, Latino, Native American, Asian American and Pacific Islander children living in low-income communities.

Leadership for Healthy Communities is a \$10 million national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the efforts we fund are expected to help the Foundation achieve its goal of reversing the childhood obesity epidemic by 2015.

# WHAT

## What We Do

We work with organizations representing elected or appointed officials from local, county, regional or state governments to achieve six primary goals:



1. *Educate state and local government leaders about the impact of public policies on the health of children and communities;*
2. *Create tools and materials that help governments implement active-living and healthy-eating strategies;*
3. *Facilitate cooperation between state and local leaders;*
4. *Build peer support networks for leaders engaged in preventing childhood obesity;*
5. *Help leaders gain public support for preventing and addressing childhood obesity through high-impact activities, like town-hall meetings, public hearings, workshops and trainings; and*
6. *Engage diverse policy-makers and community members in strategies to promote healthy eating and active living.*

# Why We Do It

America is in danger of raising the first generation of children who will live sicker and die younger than the generation before them. Obesity rates have skyrocketed among both children and adults, as have rates of related illnesses like type 2 diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and asthma. These illnesses disproportionately affect African-American, Latino, Native American, Asian American and Pacific Islander children living in low-income communities. Obesity also poses a tremendous financial threat to our economy and our health care system. Researchers estimate the epidemic costs our nation \$117 billion annually in direct medical expenses and indirect costs, including lost productivity and absenteeism.



Leadership for Healthy Communities works with local and state government leaders because they make important decisions that affect people's opportunities to eat healthy foods and be physically active within their communities. At first glance, you might think these daily decisions are about budgets, laws, regulations or zoning, but they are also about sidewalks, bike trails, playgrounds, recreation centers, school meal programs, neighborhood farmers' markets and fast-food billboards near schools. We help government leaders make the connection between their policy priorities and decisions and the health of their constituents—and we support them in their efforts to create healthier communities.

## In America...

- Nearly 25 million children and adolescents are overweight or obese.
- During the past four decades, obesity rates have soared among all age groups, increasing almost fivefold among children ages 6 to 11.
- Taxpayers—through Medicare and Medicaid—pay for half of the \$117 billion burden obesity poses on the health care system each year.
- The number of people affected by type 2 diabetes is expected to increase from 11 million to 29 million by 2050.
- 64 percent of youth do not get the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity.
- 90 percent of elementary schools do not provide daily physical education classes, and only 15 percent of kids walk or bicycle to school.
- 37 percent of children spend three or more hours per day watching television.
- The typical calorie content of menu items like soda and French fries has increased almost 50 percent in the last 20 years.
- Most TV food advertisements targeting kids are for products high in fat, calories and sodium.

# LEADERSHIP

## Leadership for Healthy Communities

*The following initiatives are samples of the work that has been created and supported by grants from Leadership for Healthy Communities.*

### Helping Latino Leaders Advocate for Healthy Changes

Every day, Latino elected officials face important decisions about school wellness, community design, neighborhood safety, transportation, housing and recreation. These issues impact whether families have access to affordable fresh foods or safe places for their children to play. The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) recognizes obesity as one of the greatest health threats facing Latino children and families—and is working with Latino leaders to create healthier communities across the country. NALEO recently formed the Healthy Communities Initiative Policy Institute, an intensive three-day leadership-development seminar to help Latino elected and appointed officials become effective, well-informed health advocates as they work to prevent childhood obesity in their communities.



### Bringing Schools and Cities Together to Prevent Obesity

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) believes in the power of collaboration and actively works with Leadership for Healthy Communities' partners to bring school superintendents, city leaders and county officials together on the issue of childhood obesity. For example, AASA is working with the National League of Cities to help city and school partnerships develop tools, policies and practices that will help reduce obesity in their communities. AASA also works with the International City/County Management Association and the National Association of Counties to convene regional discussions designed to spark community action on obesity prevention. And to share some of the best school-based obesity-prevention practices, AASA publishes "Healthy Learning News," and distributes these superintendent success stories to school districts nationwide.



## Using Smart Growth to Address Public Health Issues

The Local Government Commission (LGC) coordinates regional summits, local workshops and peer discussions to foster relationships between city and county planning departments and public health officials. By helping these professionals work together, LGC facilitates the creation of new strategies and policies aimed at creating healthier communities. For example, each year LGC organizes the New Partners for Smart Growth conference for elected officials, planners, developers, advocates, engineers and public health practitioners. This national conference is considered the premier smart growth event. It includes interactive learning experiences, tours of model projects and regional case studies, as well as sessions that highlight the latest smart growth implementation tools and best practices. Through its Center for Livable Communities, LGC also provides support for local governments and community leaders who are working to build safer streets and encourage physical activity in their communities.





## Confronting Obesity in Rural America

Through its obesity-prevention work, the National Association of Counties (NACo) learned that rural America is struggling with the obesity epidemic, but is generally underserved. To help NACo's rural members build healthier communities, NACo launched its Rural Obesity Initiative. The program includes surveying rural county officials to gain their insight on rural health, obesity and resource issues, and sharing those results with regional leaders. Future sessions featuring experts on rural America's health challenges and workshops on successful obesity-prevention policies in rural regions will take place during NACo's annual conference. As part of a national effort to address the funding shortfall facing rural communities, NACo also will issue a report that includes findings from the Rural Obesity Initiative and NACo recommendations.

## Helping Local Leaders Become Active Living Ambassadors

Local leaders have an important role in building healthy communities, which is why the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) is working to develop a network of active living and healthy eating champions across the country. The ICMA created its Active Living Ambassadors program to recruit city and county managers nationwide to serve as local advocates for healthy change. Through the program, ICMA provides free customized assistance for active living initiatives, facilitates conference calls, hosts webcasts, and provides ambassadors with regular updates, including research findings, policy ideas, tools, case studies and funding opportunities. Since its inception in 2004, the program has recruited 24 ambassadors.





## Integrating Policies to Improve Children's Health

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for state legislators to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues. The resources and support available to policy-makers through NCSL help legislators to understand, justify and develop policies that encourage healthy eating and active living, especially among children and families in vulnerable populations. For example, the NCSL Healthy Community Design Project aims to help legislators understand how to integrate policies from separate jurisdictions, such as health, education, land use, transportation and agriculture, to more effectively promote physical activity and good nutrition. The project hosts an online resource center, which includes a legislative database of bills that focus on improving nutrition and physical activity among children and a collection of case studies featuring leaders from across the country who have successfully incorporated healthy community designs in their towns and cities.

For more information on Leadership for Healthy Communities and a complete list of grantees, please visit our Web site: <http://leadershipforhealthycommunities.org>.

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