



Governors Get on Board to Help Their States Tackle Childhood Obesity

Publishing Healthy Kids, Healthy America grantee profiles of progress

SUMMARY

From 2005 to 2010, the [National Governors Association Center for Best Practices](#) worked with governors to promote initiatives to combat childhood obesity. The center convened national forums to educate governors on the epidemic; provided funding to 15 states to spur innovation in addressing it; and published reports on effective policies and programs.

Key Results

In reports to governors and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), the Center for Best Practices cited these results:

- The project raised awareness among the nation's governors about obesity—especially in children—as a critical challenge, and spurred them to take steps to address it.

"Governors have established interagency committees to better coordinate state government's response to obesity, launched new state offices focusing on obesity or improving children's health, appointed or hired career officials to direct and manage state efforts to prevent obesity, and established nutritional requirements for school foods and foods vended to state employees," according to one report.

- The 15 grantee states developed and coordinated policies and programs tackling childhood obesity in three core arenas:
 - *Child-care settings.* Two states piloted new policies and programs to improve nutrition and physical activity among preschool children.
 - *Statewide policy planning.* Four states created mechanisms for coordinating diverse programs for addressing childhood obesity.
 - *School-based efforts.* Nine states focused on implementing school wellness policies; used fitness testing or other means to assess children's health; or created a governor's award program to recognize innovative efforts in schools.

- The center published reports and issue briefs on strategies and best practices for use by governors and state agencies in combating obesity and posted them on its Web site.

Funding

RWJF funded this project with four grants totaling \$2,467,734 from November 2005 through February 2010.

CONTEXT

In 2005, Mike Huckabee, then-governor of Arkansas, became chair of the National Governors Association (NGA). Chairs select an initiative to pursue during their one-year term, and Gov. Huckabee—who had struggled with obesity and lost more than 100 pounds—chose to create *Healthy America*. The initiative sought to address obesity among adults and children by encouraging them to make healthy lifestyle choices at home, work and school. At the time, the obesity epidemic had not reached mainstream attention, according to NGA staff.

RWJF's Interest in the Area

In 2003, RWJF selected childhood obesity as a priority. RWJF's goal is to reverse the epidemic by 2015 by improving access to affordable, healthy food and expanding opportunities for physical activity in schools and communities across the nation.

RWJF staff saw Gov. Huckabee's initiative as a chance to raise the profile of childhood obesity among the nation's governors and to galvanize state efforts to address it. Governors can use their "bully pulpit" to highlight a public health problem, sign executive orders and legislation, create commissions and bring state agencies together to tackle it, observed Marjorie Paloma, RWJF program officer.

THE PROJECT

RWJF provided four grants to enable the [National Governors Association Center for Best Practices](#) to enlist governors in tackling the obesity epidemic and encourage state innovation in policies and programs.

The first grant, in 2005, helped the *Healthy America* initiative raise awareness among the nation's governors of the obesity epidemic and suggest strategies to address it (ID# 055534). A second grant, in 2006, enabled the Center for Best Practices to launch *Healthy Kids, Healthy America* (ID# 057652). That program awarded 10 states one-year grants of \$100,000 each to develop and coordinate school- and community-based efforts to address childhood obesity, particularly in low-income communities.

Some 29 states applied for the grants, and a committee chaired by Harvey Fineberg, M.D., president of the Institute of Medicine, reviewed the applications. In July 2007, the center awarded grants to Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New York, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

The center collaborated with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to allow those states to apply for an extra \$10,000 to conduct a statewide scan of existing efforts to address childhood obesity. Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New York and Rhode Island secured that funding.

Because the center received so many applications for the initial state grants, RWJF awarded a third grant in September 2007 to fund five more states: Indiana, Louisiana, New Mexico, Utah and Wisconsin (ID# 062546). A fourth grant allowed the center to create and publish a report on the activities and progress of the 15 states (ID# 065383).

Activities

Project staff convened two conferences to educate governors on the obesity epidemic:

- In December 2005, Governor Huckabee, *Healthy America* co-chair Governor Janet Napolitano of Arizona and policy leaders from 35 states and territories gathered in Arizona to discuss new strategies and best practices to enhance health and wellness among their constituents.
- In February 2006, NGA held a two-day *Healthy America* summit in Washington attended by 45 governors, President George W. Bush, other federal officials, business executives and health experts. The summit included panels and workshops on wellness in schools and communities and at worksites.

Center staff provided technical assistance to the 15 states through several activities:

- Held a webinar in 2006 on the findings of a report from the CDC on school health policies and programs.
- Held a webinar in July 2008 on the role of public and private insurance in combating childhood obesity. Some 80 officials from the 15 states and representatives from nonprofits, insurance companies, the National Institutes of Health and the CDC participated.
- Held a two-day conference in April 2008 in Nashville, Tenn., attended by leaders from the 15 states as well as representatives from Delaware, Florida, New Hampshire and North Dakota. The conference included sessions on school-based obesity surveillance; legislative trends and the role of the media and public and private health insurance in combating obesity; and roundtable discussions to enable states to share experiences.

- Funded up to 15 representatives from each state to attend a childhood obesity summit convened by RWJF and the CDC in November 2008 in Birmingham, Ala. The center hosted a dinner meeting at the summit to provide technical assistance to grantees and enable them to share lessons learned.

Corporate sponsorships secured by the center funded 13 states to develop wellness programs for adults at worksites and in communities (see [Other Funding](#)). The recipients (in May 2006) were: Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin.

Other Funding

The CDC provided \$2 million and the National Governors Association provided \$150,000 to support the center's work. The center also received more than \$1.15 million in private-sector funds from AstraZeneca (\$250,000), Novo Nordisk (\$200,000), Aetna (\$100,000), General Mills (\$100,000), Johnson & Johnson (\$100,000), PepsiCo (\$100,000), Pfizer (\$100,000), Wal-Mart (\$100,000) and Anheuser-Busch (\$75,000).

RESULTS

In reports to the governors and RWJF, project staff at the center cited these results:

Enlisting Governors in Tackling Obesity

- **The project raised awareness among the nation's governors about obesity—especially in children—as a critical challenge, and spurred them to take steps to address it.**

"Governors have established interagency committees to better coordinate state government's response to obesity, launched new state offices focusing on obesity or improving children's health, appointed or hired career officials to direct and manage state efforts to prevent obesity and established nutritional requirements for school foods and foods vended to state employees," according to one report (see below).

In May 2006, governors of 26 states also participated in *Healthy America* week—sponsored by the NGA—by hosting events promoting wellness. For example, Gov. Huckabee joined Gov. Phil Bredesen of Tennessee and students at a town hall meeting on boosting youth wellness in and out of school. Hosted by Channel One Network, the town hall reached 7 million viewers.

Project co-director Kathleen Nolan said, "There wasn't a governor who wasn't tuned in to these issues by the time we were done."

Spurring State Innovation

- **The 15 states planned and coordinated policies and programs tackling childhood obesity in three core arenas:**
 - ***Child-care settings.*** Two states piloted new policies and programs to improve nutrition and physical activity among preschool children:
 - ***Kentucky*** developed a voluntary certification program for licensed preschool and after-school facilities. To win certification, the facilities had to meet standards for improving children's nutrition and boosting their physical activity, and train their staff in doing so.
 - ***Tennessee*** created the Gold Sneaker Initiative to recognize child-care facilities that meet nutrition and physical activity standards, and trained 500 child-care providers in implementing those standards.
 - ***Statewide policy planning.*** Four states coordinated diverse programs for addressing childhood obesity:
 - ***Michigan*** created a workgroup composed of leaders from the public, private and nonprofit sectors—led by the state surgeon general—that developed a five-year, 18-strategy policy agenda and transitioned those efforts to an independent coalition.
 - ***Minnesota*** conducted a statewide survey of existing policies and programs to prevent childhood obesity and developed a five-year action plan.
 - ***Mississippi*** established the Governor's Task Force on Childhood Obesity to coordinate child wellness across agencies, held a policy summit and developed a blueprint for addressing childhood obesity that included a marketing campaign.
 - ***New Mexico*** created the position of special advisor to the secretary of health to coordinate the Governor's Interagency Task Force on Obesity and launched a pilot childhood wellness program in one city.
 - ***School-based efforts.*** Nine states focused on implementing school wellness policies; used fitness testing or other means to assess children's health; or created a governor's award program to recognize innovative efforts in schools:
 - ***Indiana*** implemented a pilot program for students combining classroom and online instruction promoting good nutrition and physical activity.
 - ***Louisiana*** created an interdisciplinary policy team with representatives from the public, private and nonprofit sectors to survey schools, provide technical assistance and develop a resource guide to improve implementation of school wellness policies across the state.

- **New York** developed guidelines on nutrition and physical activity for after-school programs, trained teachers and superintendents to use them and developed online resources. More than 130 sites implemented the guidelines the first year.
- **Rhode Island** provided technical assistance in implementing wellness policies to every school. Policies in each district now limit the availability of unhealthy foods and beverages. The state won five-year CDC funding for a new system for tracking childhood obesity.
- **South Dakota** awarded minigrants to a dozen schools, districts and out-of-school-time programs to improve their nutrition and physical activity policies and turned the results into online training modules.
- **Utah** created the Gold Medal Schools program to recognize schools that develop health policies and trained 600 teachers in using non-food incentives and incorporating physical activity into the curriculum.
- **Virginia** provided minigrants to low-income communities to assess and improve the nutrition, physical activity, and fitness of at-risk students, and to improve performance on the Governor's Nutrition and Physical Activity Scorecard and the Virginia Wellness Related Fitness Test.
- **West Virginia** instituted comprehensive wellness checks for all incoming kindergarteners in public schools, funded by both public agencies and private companies.
- **Wisconsin** piloted and evaluated implementation of its School Health Award Program in 20 schools and used the results to encourage improvements in nutrition and physical activity in schools statewide.

Developing Reports and Policy Tools

- **The Center for Best Practices published reports on strategies and best practices in combating obesity and posted them on its Web site.** The publications included:
 - Five issue briefs outlining a framework for gubernatorial action to combat obesity: three briefs on building healthy schools, communities and workplaces, and two suggesting priority state programs. They are available online; see the [Bibliography](#).
 - *Call to Action: An Agenda for America's Governors*, which outlines the scientific and economic evidence for combating obesity; suggests how states can evaluate residents' needs and develop a plan for addressing them; and provides a guide for putting plans into practice.
 - An overview fact sheet and 50 state-based fact sheets on the return on investment from disease prevention and wellness programs. The center distributed the fact

sheets to governors during the August 2006 summit, and sent 500 copies to their senior staff. Available online; see the [Bibliography](#) for hyperlinks.

- *Shaping a Healthier Generation: Successful State Strategies to Prevent Childhood Obesity*, a report that examines state tactics for encouraging children ages 2 to 13 to eat healthier food and be physically active in child-care and health care settings, schools and communities. The report also suggests how policy-makers can develop a comprehensive, coordinated agenda to prevent childhood obesity. 2009 version available [online](#). 2010 version (*Healthy Kids, Healthy America, State Profiles in Progress*) available [online](#).
- *Profiles of Progress*, which highlights lessons learned and progress in the 15 *Healthy Kids, Healthy America* states. The publication includes an overview of governor-led initiatives to coordinate policies and programs, snapshots on each state and in-depth case studies on the impact of activities in four states.

"We helped provide a framework for states to help think about this issue," said Joyal Mulheron, project co-director. "Here are some practices that have demonstrated success. This is what works and frankly, this is what other people have tried and what didn't work."

See the [Bibliography](#) for details.

Significance to the Field

Before the project, according to co-director Nolan, "childhood obesity was considered a federal or local issue. This set of grants showed that the states play a pivotal role from both a leadership and a policy perspective."

Added co-director Mulheron, "Toward the end we had a lot better understanding of the leverage and reach of the governors' offices, and how they can promote policies, regulations and laws, name commissions and make cabinet appointments to get this done."

LESSON LEARNED

1. **Avoid preconceived notions about which strategies public officials should use to address a public health challenge.** What works in one state, might not work in another, and officials need the flexibility to try different options. In this case, project staff offered governors a menu of approaches for combating childhood obesity. (Project Co-Director/Nolan; Program Officer/Paloma)

AFTERWARD

The Center for Best Practices plans to host a webinar in 2010 on state strategies for school lunch programs—including using them to promote good nutrition—funded by the

CDC. The center also intends to keep the publications developed under *Health Kids*, *Healthy America* on its Web site.

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