



GET A LIFE! Combats Childhood Obesity in the Mississippi Delta

Faith-based advocacy: Galvanizing communities to end childhood obesity

SUMMARY

From 2008 to 2010, staff at Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi created and implemented GET A LIFE!, an initiative to combat childhood obesity by improving access to nutritious food and increasing opportunities for safe physical activities for children in the region. The initiative also worked to improve the health and wellness of local faith congregations. The foundation is a public charity in Hernando, Miss., that supports social improvement projects in eight counties in the state's Mississippi Delta area.

This project was funded under a solicitation for proposals from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), entitled [Faith-Based Advocacy: Galvanizing Communities to End Childhood Obesity](#), which supports faith-based coalitions to advance community policies and environmental changes that improve access to healthy foods and/or opportunities for physical activity. See the [Introduction](#) for more information.

Results

As reported to RWJF by the project team, the GET A LIFE! project resulted in the following accomplishments:

- The GET A LIFE! team assembled a coalition of approximately 50 faith congregations, called Healthy Congregations, to promote changes leading to healthier congregations and communities. A board composed of 10 members from various congregations guided the coalition. More than 35 of these congregations also created "health ministries" with activities such as encouraging the inclusion of healthy food options at church functions, offering health fairs at the church and promoting health in sermons.

The Community Foundation also sponsored two conferences for the Healthy Congregations coalition, both held in Southaven, Miss., to promote health advocacy among members and share best practices. Attendees additionally learned how to use their facilities as places for play and exercise.

- The 2009 Healthy Congregations Conference, held on October 10, 2009, drew 300 people from 48 churches.
- The 2010 Healthy Congregations Conference, held on October 9, 2010, drew 314 people from 51 churches.
- The project team worked with five other organizations to develop a Faith Community Nurse/Health Ministry Advocate Training program, a 32-hour curriculum that prepares individuals to assume leadership roles in health ministry programs within their congregation and the larger community. Upon completion of the curriculum, registered nurses are certified as Faith Community Nurses and lay members as Health Ministry Advocates. The Community Foundation also provided modest scholarships (\$500 to \$600) for trainees.

Some 13 Faith Community Nurses and 29 Health Ministry Advocates completed the training and are actively working on church and/or community health ministry projects. The five other co-sponsors of the program were:

- Catholic Diocese of Memphis
- North Central Area Health Education Center
- Northwest Mississippi Community College School of Nursing
- Northwest Mississippi Junior College Continuing Education
- Union University, Jackson, Tenn.
- The project team increased the availability of affordable, healthy foods by:
 - Encouraging the creation of church gardens. Ten churches housing 23 congregations used modest "seed fund" grants (\$200 to \$300) from the Community Foundation to purchase seeds and gardening tools.
 - Constructing hoop houses (greenhouses with plastic roof wrapped over flexible piping) for three local growers, who agreed to provide 20 percent of their crops from the hoop houses to three local churches.
- The project team identified potential playground sites and food deserts (areas where healthy, affordable food is difficult to obtain) by developing GIS (geographic information system) maps for each of the eight counties. The maps, which can be updated as appropriate and used in future community planning efforts, indicate areas where:
 - More than 45 percent of the population has an education level of 12th grade or below
 - More than 30 percent of the population is at the census-designated poverty level
 - More than 35 percent of the population is African-American

- Existing parks, open spaces, food pantries, fresh produce sites and churches are located
- The project team created the [GET A LIFE!](#) Web site, which includes an overview of the project, news updates and related links, including a link to a report about the project entitled *GET A LIFE! Fighting Childhood Obesity: A Roadmap to Success*. The team also gathered information from the Internet to assemble toolkits and pamphlets on activities such as starting a church garden and a health ministry. See the [Bibliography](#) for details.
- The project was covered in an [article](#) in the *New York Times* on August 22, 2011.

Lessons Learned

1. **Identify a champion who can help build support for the initiative and enhance its visibility.** According to Project Director Thomas F. Pittman, M.Div., this initiative found its champion in Michael Minor of Memphis, Tenn., who served as chair of the Healthy Congregations board.

As a consultant focusing on faith-based health and wellness advocacy, Minor promoted the initiative throughout the region. For example, through his work with the National Baptist Congress of Christian Education (an auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention, USA, the nation's largest African-American denomination), Healthy Congregations became one of only eight exhibitors selected for the organization's Health Fair 2010 in Texas with more than 20,000 people attending.

2. **Capitalize on the social improvement efforts of existing organizations.** For example, the project team worked with the Quitman County Ministerial Association, which had longstanding relationships with local farmers, to persuade the farmers to donate 20 percent of their produce from hoop houses to needy families. (Project Director Pittman)

Funding

RWJF supported this project through a grant of \$209,833 through its solicitation Faith-Based Advocacy: Galvanizing Communities to End Childhood Obesity.

Afterward

- The Healthy Congregations coalition and its members continue to be engaged in promoting healthy food choices and physical activity. The Healthy Congregations Conference will convene again in 2011 with major support shifting from the Community Foundation to the Mississippi Department of Health, which has also awarded modest grants to some congregations to help them establish health ministries.

- Ongoing support for the Faith Community Nurse/Health Ministry Advocate Training program has shifted to the North Central Area Health Education Center. A third class began in February 2011. The center also created networking opportunities for program graduates that include a roundtable discussion at the 2011 Healthy Congregations Conference, a newsletter and access to the newsletter and Facebook page of the International Parish Nurse Resource Center.

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Grant ID # 065328

Program area: Childhood Obesity

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(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

Report or White Paper

GET A LIFE! Fighting Childhood Obesity: A Roadmap to Success. Hernando, MS: Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, 2010. Available [online](#).

Education or Toolkit

Annual Guide for Health Ministries. Hernando, MS: Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, 2010. Available [online](#).

How to Start a Health Ministry. Hernando, MS: Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, 2010.

Starting Community or Congregational Garden. Hernando, MS: Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, 2010. Available [online](#).

Communication or Promotion

www.cfm.org/gal. The GET A LIFE! initiative's Web site includes an overview of the initiative, news updates and related links. Hernando, MS: Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi.