Overweight and obesity in Georgia have reached epidemic proportions. The health of Georgia’s citizens and the economic vitality of the state are at-risk. Children in Georgia are more overweight than their peers in other states. In outlining an approach for addressing childhood obesity, the Institute of Medicine recently noted:

"Obesity ‘is not the responsibility of individuals alone, especially for children who have little or no control over the social and environmental factors with which they must live. The nation shares a collective responsibility in rectifying the childhood obesity trend, and a clear focus of prevention efforts should involve the community that affects the daily lives of our children and youth’." (1)

Communities have a critical role to play in addressing the overweight and obesity crisis. They provide the context, environment and opportunities for children to be physically active. Communities share a collective sense of identity. It is an important resource for fostering change and developing effective strategies to promote healthy weight. Reversing current obesity trends requires changes that are robust enough to influence behavioral norms. (1)

Existing evidence supports community involvement in promoting physical activity. (2) Four characteristics of communities that are associated with successful efforts to promote physical activity and a healthy weight have been identified. They include the following:

Accessibility
The design of communities influence how residents engage in routine physical activity. Well-designed communities provide safe, accessible and aesthetically pleasing venues that promote physical activity. (4) Children and adolescents living in communities with parks, playgrounds, trails and recreation programs tend to be more physically active than those living in neighborhoods with fewer recreational spaces and facilities. (9) Linking areas for physical activity to homes and neighborhoods is vital. Adults and children tend to be more physically active when trails or walking paths connect recreational areas to their places of residence.

Opportunities for increasing community accessibility include: (5)

- Performing community assessments to identify and address barriers of accessibility (i.e. vehicular traffic, high crime rates and lack of spaces).
- Redesigning existing community layouts to promote greater access and reduced dependency on driving.
- Developing facility maintenance plans to serve as an effective way for keeping recreation areas aesthetically pleasing and free of crime.
- Establishing local land-use plans that ensure pedestrian and bicycle-friendly elements, as well as open green spaces and parks.
For example, the community of Washington, Georgia community used findings from a community-based health assessment to ascertain that walking and biking trails were a priority in the community. The community assessment led to the construction of walking and biking trails that linked schools and the community in an effort to promote physical activity. Distances were clearly marked on the trails and they were lighted to help promote safety and encourage use. A school-based program called Tiger Tracks was implemented to encourage children to walk with their parents and provided incentives for children.

**Community Coalitions and Partnerships**

Addressing the problem of obesity requires the involvement of all community members – social and civic organizations, child-care centers, businesses, restaurants, grocery stores, recreation/fitness centers, public health agencies, city planners, private developers, safety organizations, hospitals, government agencies, media groups and others. By fostering and sustaining participation by local organizations and residents, communities can build effective coalitions and programs to promote physical activity and healthy weight.\(^5\) Coalitions provide a forum through which communities can leverage local resources to expand access to programs, enhance communication and engage new partners.\(^6\)

In Lowndes County the community has formed an Obesity Task Force composed of local community leaders, educators and public health personnel. The Task Force meets monthly, to discuss issues facing the community and state leaders. they also provides oversight and support for school-based healthy eating and physical activities in Valdosta and Lowndes County Schools.

Coalitions promote partnerships and collaboration between local groups that have an interest in promoting healthy behaviors among youth. These include organizations such as YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, community centers, parks and recreation centers, and faith-based organizations. Collectively, local groups can develop and provide structured community-based programs, including youth after-school programs.\(^6\) The YMCA of Metro Atlanta partnered with local after-school care sites to provide a twelve week after-school program called “Youth Fit for Life.” School counselors have been trained by YMCA staff to administer the sessions. Program evaluations indicate significant improvements in body composition, strength and endurance of children who participate. Additionally, participants have been found to be more likely to be active outside the program as a result of the skills acquired through participation.

**Awareness**

Reversing overweight and obesity trends requires changes in lifestyle. Studies show that even modest weight loss over a period of 1-2 years can reduce the risks of diseases associated with obesity (e.g. diabetes onset).\(^7\) Improving community awareness of the benefits of regular physical activity can lead community members to undergo sustained changes in lifestyle. Experts agree that the most effective public health information is:

- Evidence-based;
- Provided from a trustworthy source;
- Representative of clinical services and population based strategies;
- Inclusive of chronic disease risk reduction and health promotion messages
- Culturally competent.\(^8\)

Organizations and coalitions that publicize their activities to encourage involvement will be more likely to engage community members.\(^6\) Communities may utilize newspaper, TV, radio and other mechanisms for promoting local activities and health-promoting messages. Local restaurants and grocery stores can increase awareness by offering nutritious food options and providing discounts on healthy choices.
An important community-based venue for increasing awareness of healthy behaviors is the school environment. Children and adolescents spend a significant portion of their time at school, and they learn and practice behaviors related to physical activity, dietary intake and overall wellness. Parents and other community members and organizations can be effective advocates for quality, age-appropriate health and physical education.

For example, the Northwest Georgia Healthcare Partnership is working with three school systems in northwest Georgia to promote physical activity, reduce screen time at home among elementary students and increase fruit and vegetable consumption. Scripted announcements have been provided to each school’s morning announcement coordinator including ideas for student participation, nutrition and fitness tips, family friendly ideas and fun facts. Media specialists have been given a reading list of books and materials that encourage healthy lifestyles as well as ideas for displays and bulletin boards. Music and art teachers have been encouraged to integrate healthy eating and physical activity into their subject areas. In addition, school vending content was analyzed and shared to encourage healthier choices.

Be Accountable

Communities possess the capacity to develop goals and objectives for increasing physical activity. A good starting point is to perform a community assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and barriers to increasing physical activity. Goals should be evaluated utilizing both quantitative and qualitative metrics. Collection of valid metrics enables communities to effectively allocate resources, manage individual projects and ultimately improve program success. It is also important to find out what other communities have tried, which efforts have succeeded and which have failed, and why. This will allow a portfolio of model practices to be compiled that can be shared between communities so that resources can be used most effectively.

Healthcare Georgia Foundation is currently funding six community-based projects focused on increasing physical activity and health eating in youth. The Childhood Physical Activity and Nutrition Project have developed logic models, which include inputs, strategies, outputs and outcomes.

Local communities and program providers can often access resources to support evaluation of their obesity prevention efforts by seeking technical assistance from state agencies, universities and philanthropic organizations. Partnership of this nature in Georgia are already underway.

Data are currently being collected in all six projects to determine if project programs could prevent excess weight gain; increase consumption of healthy foods and increase physical activity. In addition to these cross-site measures, each of the six sites has developed site-specific evaluation measures that focus on their particular program activities. Results from these evaluation efforts are expected in early 2010 and will provide important information about the efficacy of these programs.

Conclusion: A Call for Action

The overweight and obesity epidemic has medical, economic and social consequences that impact everyone. An increased focus by communities on obesity prevention is an integral part of a comprehensive solution. Communities play a vital role in providing an environment that is conducive to physical activity for both adults and children. It is up to each community to form a coalition, assess its own needs, and to identify specific goals to meet those needs. They should seek out partnerships with evaluation experts, as needed, to determine the effectiveness of their programs. Furthermore, communities should work with each other to avoid duplicating efforts and to ensure the implementation of best practices. Communities have great potential to initiate changes necessary to ensure the health and well-being of Georgia into the future.

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