

Building an Obesity Movement through Policy and Environmental Change in Alexandria, Virginia

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Overview

Nearly 44 percent of children two- to five-years-old in Alexandria, VA, are overweight or obese, according to a 2007 study by Inova Health System. Latinos (32.9% overweight/obese) and families 200 percent below the federal poverty level (29.9% overweight/obese) are particularly at risk. These startling statistics galvanized the community to take action, with support from an ACHIEVE (Action Communities for Health, Innovation, and EnVironmental changeE) grant through the National Association of County and City Health Officials.

Under the auspices of the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria (PHA), a 200-member, citizen-led coalition of non-profit organizations, the faith community, schools, city agencies, local businesses, government and community leaders, the Alexandria Childhood Obesity Action Network (A-COAN) was formed to promote active lifestyles and healthy eating for toddlers and preschoolers through policies, systems, and environmental change.

When A-COAN was formed in 2009, its members undertook a number of community assessments to better understand the nutrition and recreation environment in Alexandria. A-COAN used the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's

CHANGE Tool, a GIS mapping project, a survey of preschool and childcare center directors, surveys of Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program participants, and focus groups with parent playgroups for toddlers and preschoolers. A-COAN then used the combined results to create an obesity-prevention plan with four strategic goals:

- Increase support of and opportunities for breastfeeding;
- Increase the availability and use of safe places to play for children ages two to five;
- Increase the availability of and accessibility to healthy foods; and
- Engage preschool centers and family day care providers in creating healthier food and physical activity environments.

Creating Opportunities through Play Spaces

Through various assessments, A-COAN learned that parents worried about neighborhood safety and a lack of play spaces. Given the city's previous investment in playgrounds and the economic downturn, A-COAN had to make a persuasive argument for additional investments in play spaces. A-COAN received a Healthy Eating, Active Living (HEAL) grant from Kaiser Permanente to conduct a play space assessment and Photovoice project to inform future advocacy work around play spaces.

Figure 1 Key Strategies Pursued by A-COAN

Key Strategies	Policies and Systems Change Successes
Increase availability and use of safe places to play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The city's strategic plan included health issues for the first time, including a "Playspaces for Tots" initiative.
Increase support of and opportunities for breastfeeding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Alexandria Health Department passed breastfeeding support policies and designated breast pump rooms for staff and clients. ■ The city council amended local indecent exposure ordinance to include an exception for breastfeeding. ■ The city council passed a resolution expressly stating that women may breastfeed anywhere on city-owned property, which reinforced the health impact of breastfeeding, and asked that the city manager create a breastfeeding policy for city employees.
Engage preschool centers and family day care providers in creating healthier environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fourteen preschools piloted the "Color Me Healthy" program and considered additional healthy policy changes. ■ The Department of Human Services adopted Color Me Healthy for family day care providers and trained staff in using material to support and coach providers.

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Adding Health to the City's Strategic Plan

The Alexandria Health Department actively participated in the city's strategic planning process for the coming three to five years (the previous plan did not include health). For A-COAN, this offered a unique opportunity to draw attention to childhood obesity and engage the city in creating healthier environments. Staff proposed including two A-COAN initiatives from its action plan centered on access to food and play spaces. Through community forums and online feedback, PHA and A-COAN partners reinforced the importance of these initiatives. This vocal community engagement was critical in successfully including A-COAN's strategies.

Making the Case for Breastfeeding

A-COAN investigated the city's breastfeeding policies and learned that Alexandria's indecent exposure ordinance failed to make an exception for breastfeeding. Later, informal interviews with service providers underscored the need for more breastfeeding support.

A-COAN formed a Breastfeeding Promotion Committee composed of stakeholders—WIC, the local health department's pediatric clinic, the federally qualified health center, home visiting organizations, and La Leche League—to discuss how to better support breastfeeding within the community. Enlisting the support of two city council members, A-COAN successfully advocated for an ordinance amendment and policy resolution that ensures women are allowed to breastfeed on city property, encourages businesses to adopt breastfeeding policies, and requests the city manager to create a breastfeeding support policy. The Alexandria Health Department took a leadership role and created a model breastfeeding policy for the community, including express pump rooms for staff and clients.

The committee is now developing an outreach plan to encourage businesses to adopt breastfeeding policies. It is also developing consistent health messaging and trainings for service providers. The policy changes helped launch the breastfeeding campaign, but grassroots follow-up efforts will be critical to ensuring a positive impact on breastfeeding rates.

A Healthy Start—Healthy Preschools and Family Child Care Providers

Given the high rates of overweight and obesity among toddlers and preschoolers, A-COAN believed that preschools and family day care providers were critical partners.

Preschools and Day Care Centers

A-COAN formed a Preschool Committee and recruited members of the early childcare community to jointly develop a plan to engage preschools and childcare centers in creating healthier environments for children. At a kick-off luncheon for preschool center directors, A-COAN learned of some efforts already underway, and several directors volunteered to identify a common health plan for preschools and lead its implementation.

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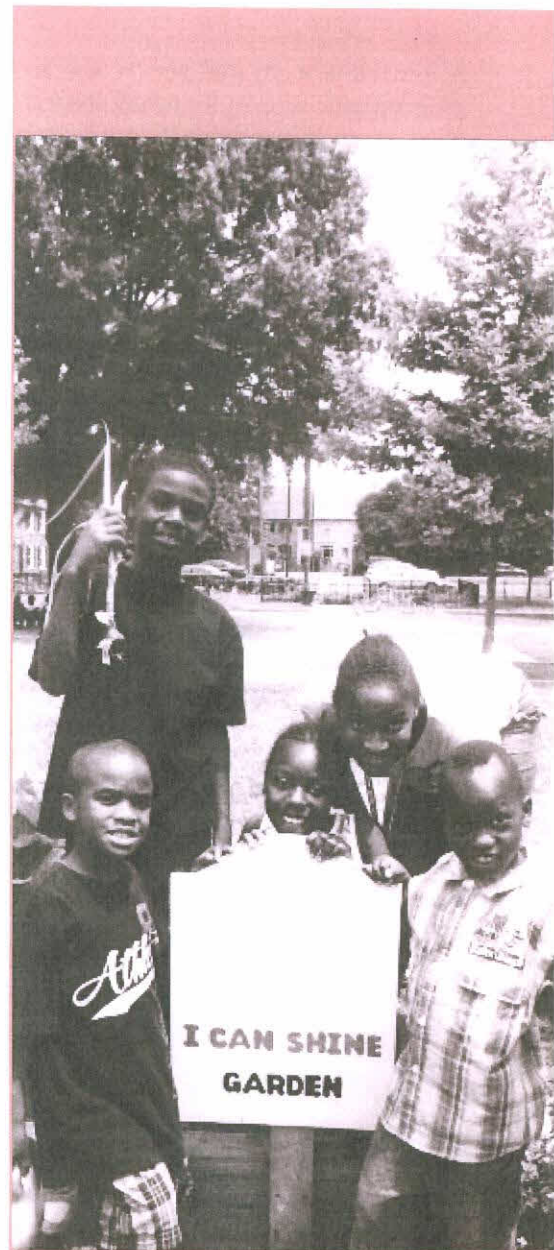
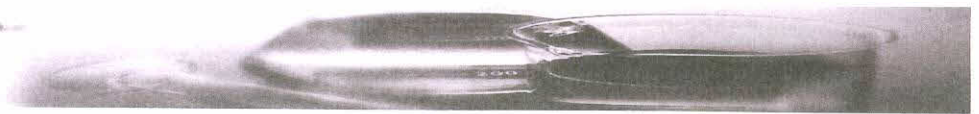


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In October 2010, 14 preschools (including 22 centers and 45 classrooms serving over 1,000 children) began piloting Color Me Healthy. Surveys to gauge the extent of the curriculum's implementation are underway. Each center participating in the pilot also completed an initial environmental scan identifying ways that centers could further support health. Follow-up conversations among preschool directors indicate that changes are already being made.

Family Child Care Providers

In Alexandria, a city staff person (also an A-COAN partner) directs training and programmatic support for family childcare providers. What began as a small pilot test of 10 providers employing the curriculum has expanded to 30 providers as part of a broader health initiative. City staff who conduct home visits with the family child care providers have also been trained in Color Me Healthy. They now use it as a tool to work with providers in educating children across a number of disciplines.

Steps toward Equal Access to Healthy Foods

A-COAN approached the issue of increasing access to healthy foods from several perspectives—increasing gardening opportunities by working with organizations who served low-income residents and working with farmers' markets to get food stamps accepted.

Gardening in the Community

A-COAN reached out to the local housing authority about installing community gardens in public housing where a large number of young children live. In this case, an environmental change was critical to establishing community gardens, but without educational and programming support, the gardens alone would be insufficient in creating meaningful health changes.

In spring 2010, a children's learning garden and over 30 family plots were installed outside one of the public housing community centers, with horticulture technical assistance provided by Virginia Cooperative Extension and Master Gardeners. A-COAN also contacted a local chef to teach cooking classes on-site. Surveys conducted with the gardeners after the growing seasons showed that the adults increased their consumption of vegetables; children could name vegetables that they had helped grow; and many adult gardeners felt increased social interaction with their neighbors.

A-COAN is now working to promote resident leadership. Sponsored by A-COAN, two resident gardeners attended a leadership training led by the American Community Gardening Association. In addition, recognizing the association between literacy and health, A-COAN contacted a children's reading enrichment program and jointly recruited 34 volunteers to conduct weekly "read-aloud" programs for the children at the community center with monthly sessions devoted to healthy food, gardening, and physical activity.

Food Stamps and Farmers' Markets

Previously, none of the Alexandria farmers' markets accepted Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food stamps. Leaders within A-COAN approached managers of a new market, located in a predominantly low-income, Latino community to see if they could provide assistance in establishing a food stamp acceptance program and promoting the use of SNAP at the market. Beginning this spring, all vendors at that market will accept food stamps.

The local hospital system is sponsoring a pilot "double-dollar" program to help stretch SNAP participants' food dollars at the market. Because the market is located on a border

shared with another jurisdiction, A-COAN enlisted the support of local non-profits, the faith community, the human services departments, and the health departments in both jurisdictions to promote the market among low-income clients they serve.

Lessons Learned and Conclusion

A-COAN's action plan is anchored in the belief that policy and environmental changes are critical but alone are insufficient in creating community change. A-COAN strives to maintain balance and synergy among policy change, program development, promotion, and education. In the case of breastfeeding, A-COAN successfully created policy change at the local government level and hopes to leverage that success in creating environmental and organizational changes within the community to better support breastfeeding mothers. In contrast, the success of the Color Me Healthy program and the enthusiastic response it has received from teachers and family day care providers have generated broader organizational changes among preschool centers and city departments.

A-COAN's success is in large part due to the community's commitment to ensuring that every child has access to healthy food and safe places to play. A-COAN has provided a structure for all sectors of the community to work together toward the common goal of reducing childhood obesity. In order to create community change, these stakeholders have to be involved in problem-solving and solution-finding. ■

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