

Obesity causes or exacerbates numerous chronic diseases and conditions that can lead to death, including diabetes and hypertension. In an effort to address the obesity epidemic in Arkansas — which affects more than one-third of adults in our state — the governor-led Healthy Active Arkansas (HAA) initiative provides a 10-year framework with phased goals to increase the percentage of Arkansans who are at a healthy weight. The HAA plan is comprised of nine priority areas in which individuals and communities can take action to encourage and enable healthier lifestyles. Supported by funding from the Blue & You Foundation for a Healthier Arkansas, the Arkansas Center for Health Improvement convened 10 statewide learning network meetings beginning in 2017 to engage, recruit, and activate a network of local champions to assist in meeting these goals. This study is part of a series of case studies highlighting success stories from the HAA Statewide Learning Network. Visit achi.net for more resources, including additional case studies and a template for creating your own action plan for your community.

HEALTHY ACTIVE ARKANSAS STATEWIDE LEARNING NETWORK

During the first year of the learning network, the Arkansas Center for Health Improvement (ACHI) hosted meetings in Jonesboro, McGehee, Little Rock, Clarksville, and Magnolia. In an effort to reach other areas of the state and expand the learning network, ACHI held an additional five meetings in Springdale, Mountain Home, Hot Springs, El Dorado, and Helena-West Helena in 2018. In total, over 460 city and county officials, hospital executives, superintendents, college administrators, community advocates, and others joined the HAA Statewide Learning Network to make their communities healthier and more active places to live, work, and play. Network members developed more than 175 action plans to create change in at least one of the nine priority areas. Each action plan identified strategies and key partners necessary to reach the desired outcome, as well as potential barriers.

At the learning network meeting in Hot Springs, Leslee Tell, advanced nutrition & dietetics instructor at Conway High School, discussed her experience expanding health and nutrition programs at Conway High School. The HAA priority areas addressed through this program include:

- Priority 1: Physical and built environment;
- Priority 3: Nutritional standards in schools – early child care through college;
- Priority 4: Physical education and activity in schools – early child care through college; and
- Priority 9: Marketing program.

HEALTHY CATS

As a family and consumer sciences teacher for more than 15 years,¹ Tell recognized an opportunity for her students at Conway High School to get involved in educating elementary students about the importance of healthy eating and water consumption. “It’s easier to change a younger child’s habits than it is to change [an adult’s habits],” Tell said. “I want to use high school students to motivate younger elementary school students.”

In 2017, Tell received \$3,000 from the Baptist Health Foundation to bring this vision to life. With the long-term goal of creating a student-run program, Tell guided her students through its development, which they named the “Healthy Cats Nutrition Program.” The students decided the program’s purpose would be to encourage healthy eating practices and water consumption, with a focus on four key concepts: drinking water, education about hidden sugars in food and beverages known as sugar shockers, understanding how the growing portion sizes can distort what is considered a normal portion size, and reading nutrition labels.² During its first year, Healthy Cats reached about 1,000 Conway Public Schools students in elementary, middle, and high school. Program activities led by her students included teaching kindergarten students about healthy foods through activities (e.g., reading books, games, and food tastings), cooking classes, Rethink Your Drink activities to encourage water consumption, identifying healthy and unhealthy groceries, a community garden project, and providing healthy snacks and a water station at 5k runs.

Due to the success of Healthy Cats' first year, Tell received an additional \$10,000 from the Baptist Health Foundation to fund the program during the 2018-2019 school year. Unlike the first year of the program, during which Healthy Cats visited multiple schools, the program will focus on one school in the second year. "We're going to stay at one particular school," said Tell. "It's called Ida Burns. Instead of visiting them once, we're going to visit them 10 times during the school year to reinforce those [healthy] habits."

The high school students will develop the curriculum for the activities and will work directly with the younger students. The funding will also be used to continue a program Tell started in the summer of 2018 that provides cooking classes for teen parents.

DIETETICS AND NUTRITION PROGRAM OF STUDY

In addition to the Healthy Cats program, Tell has been instrumental in bringing other health-related opportunities to Conway High School. After receiving a start-up grant from the Arkansas Department of Career Education in 2017, Tell made possible a new program of study for students interested in the field of nutrition and dietetics. Currently in its first year, the Dietetics and Nutrition program of study offers a hands-on learning experience and courses including advanced nutrition and dietetics, chemistry of food, food safety and nutrition, nutrition and wellness, and family and consumer sciences.

NEXT STEPS

Looking ahead, Tell hopes to expand the number of Healthy Cats cooking and nutrition classes and activities across Conway Public Schools. "My goal is for Healthy Cats to someday be completely student-run," Tell said.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Healthy Active Arkansas: <https://healthyactive.org/>
- Conway Public Schools: <http://www.conwayschools.org/>

REFERENCES

¹ Andrews, H. (2018, Oct. 4). Tell brings new program to CHS. *Log Cabin Democrat*. Retrieved from <https://www.thecabin.net/news/20181004/tell-brings-new-program-to-chs>

² National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. Serving sizes and portions. Retrieved from <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/wecan/eat-right/distortion.htm>

Note: This case study includes information provided by Leslee Tell, advanced nutrition & dietetics instructor at Conway High School. ACHI received written permission to use this information. Additional information was gathered from the Conway Public Schools website.