

# FORWARD MOMENTUM IN HEALTHY ACTIVE ARKANSAS

## Hospitals as Catalysts for Community Health Innovation

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**L**aunched in 2015, the 10-year, Governor-led Healthy Active Arkansas initiative was sparked by the state's consistently poor ranking with respect to obesity rates. The initiative is now ripening as statewide and local efforts to encourage and enable healthier lifestyles take shape through the recruitment and engagement of local leaders and the development of a statewide network to share resources and track progress.

At an early stage in Healthy Active Arkansas's planning, health and government leaders acknowledged that achievement of Healthy Active Arkansas's single overarching goal – to increase the percentage of adults, adolescents and children who are at a healthy weight – required a framework that could be adopted and implemented in realistic ways by a diverse group of stakeholders. Local decision-makers in the business community, nongovernmental organizations, educational and faith-based institutions and engaged supporters at all levels of government were the focus of recruitment. While centrally-initiated statewide policy efforts to address obesity were laudable and certainly welcomed, local champions were recognized as the true agents of change.

To energize and equip communities with the tools to create change, the Arkansas Center for Health Improvement, with support from the Blue & You Foundation for a Healthier Arkansas, set out earlier this year to develop a statewide learning network to advance Healthy Active Arkansas's objectives in the initiative's nine priority areas:

- Improving the physical and built environment;
- Encouraging nutritional standards in government, institutions and the private sector;
- Ensuring nutritional standards in schools – early child care through college;
- Ensuring physical activity and education in schools – early child care through college;
- Establishing healthy worksites;
- Enhancing access to healthy foods;
- Reducing sugar-sweetened beverage consumption;



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- Supporting breastfeeding; and
- Implementing a communications and marketing program to support all priority areas.

Nearly 250 local hospital executives, city and county officials, superintendents, college administrators, community advocates and others have joined the network and have committed to changing norms and behaviors with respect to nutrition and physical activity where they live, work, pray and play.

During five regional meetings around the state, members of the network generated more than 100 action plans identifying strategies, barriers and partners to create change in at least one of the nine priority areas. Facilitated by technical assistance from the Healthy Active Arkansas priority area leads, plans are already turning into action.

For example, one hospital's action plan has resulted in a system-wide assessment of healthy vending/food options with the goal to incrementally but significantly increase the percentage of healthy options available.

At least two counties have formed their own local Healthy Active county collaborations, propagating further action planning within the community.

Three Arkansas hospitals have implemented practices that protect, promote, and support breastfeeding and have received designations through the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative, while four others are well on their way to obtaining such a designation by year's end.

Several businesses across the state also have committed to optimizing work environments to support breastfeeding.

Leading by example, the Arkansas General Assembly and Governor's office participated in the Capitol Go! Fitness Chal-

allenge, logging more than 32 million steps during the 2017 legislative session, and 53 schools and 20 hospitals participated in the Blue and You Fitness Challenge this year.

Hospitals are well-poised to drive community change to achieve a healthy, active Arkansas. Hospitals are among the largest employers in many Arkansas communities. Faced with budgetary constraints like other businesses, hospitals have strong incentives to create a healthy environment for employees in order to reduce their own health care costs and improve employee productivity. Hospitals can also serve a critical function as respected leaders and role models to help establish a business commitment to healthy worksites.

Non-profit hospitals can also satisfy federal tax requirements to conduct community benefit and community-building activities identified through those assessments by plugging into Healthy Active Arkansas efforts. There is a heightened need to demonstrate community benefit at a time when expanded health care coverage is reducing the need for charity care. The nine priority areas in Healthy Active Arkansas offer hospitals opportunities to collaborate with non-traditional partners and to invest in their community's ability to engage in healthy lifestyles.

Finally, hospitals are encountering new pressures under value-based payment models that reward providers for keeping people healthy. These new models are creating incentives for hospitals to define target populations that include not only their

patients, but also everyone in their geographic communities, and to broaden strategies to address non-medical determinants of health. With a focus on access to wholesome foods and opportunities for physical activity – major factors impacting health – Healthy Active Arkansas offers a framework for community leaders, including hospitals, to align interventions that can help hospitals be more successful in these new payment models by preventing or reducing obesity-related health issues and their associated costs.

Now two years into the initiative, Healthy Active Arkansas is gaining considerable momentum. A tax exempt, non-profit organization has been formed to provide infrastructure, authority and ownership, but local champions will continue to be the drivers of change to realize the vision of a healthier Arkansas – one in which Arkansans are more apt to maintain a healthy weight, allowing them as well as their communities to prosper from reduced healthcare expenditures, higher productivity and improved quality of life.

A hospital's core mission, of course, is to provide medical care to its patients. However, with significant influence through their roles as respected organizations and large employers, as well as their leadership expertise, hospitals are not only a critical partner, but can also serve as a catalyst to foster a community-wide infrastructure and align local strategies to combat obesity, an innovative investment with many returns. ■



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