

# Healthy Active Arkansas Statewide Learning Network



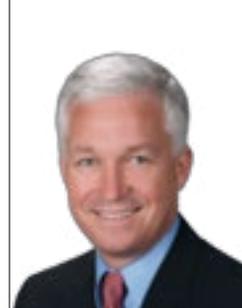
Nearly everyone is aware of the risks of tobacco and the toll that it has taken on Arkansans during the last century. From back when there was a smoking section on airplanes to today when all airplanes and most Arkansas indoor air is smoke free, we have changed a paradigm. An equally dangerous threat has emerged for the twenty-first century—physical inactivity and growing levels of obesity.

ARKANSAS HAS BECOME one of the most obese states in the nation, with a rate that has risen dramatically over the last twenty-five years. This dramatic increase points to an urgent need for strategies to combat this obesity epidemic, which is a root cause of major health conditions affecting our citizens—heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, cancer, and more.

Healthy Active Arkansas (HAA), launched in 2015 as a Governor-endorsed framework for encouraging and enabling healthier lifestyles in Arkansas, helps to fight this epidemic. Earlier this year, Governor Hutchinson appointed Miss America 2017, Ms. Savvy Shields, as the Honorary Chair and Statewide Ambassador of HAA. Ms. Shields leverages her public influence to advocate for change in her home state. Her platform, “Eat Better, Live Better” aims to encourage everyone to be proactive in choosing a healthier and happier way of life.

Numerous community partners support this effort. The Blue & You Foundation for a Healthier Arkansas funded projects this year to build infrastructure for HAA. These include HAA website development by the

**Joseph W. Thompson, MD, MPH**  
Director, Arkansas Center for Health Improvement



## Each of us is a health policymaker—choosing items at the grocery store, taking care of our children and elders, and more.

Arkansas Department of Health and statewide summits hosted by the Arkansas Center for Health Improvement (ACHI) to build the HAA network. Similar to the Governor's appointment of Miss America as HAA State-wide Ambassador, ACHI seeks to expand the reach of HAA by engaging members of the community throughout the state.

In May and June, ACHI held a series of meetings across the state to inform, recruit, and mobilize new champions to assist us and our partners in addressing the state's obesity crisis. As part of a new and developing Statewide Learning Network, these meetings were geared toward community leaders who serve a critical role in guiding local efforts to reduce obesity, a major factor in improving overall health.

The regional meetings—held in Jonesboro, McGehee, Clarksville, Little Rock, and Magnolia—provided information about the HAA plan's nine priority areas and successes thus far, engaged with local leaders who have championed efforts in their communities, and targeted areas where attendees can activate others in their communities to strengthen efforts to address the obesity crisis. Attendees completed an action plan which ACHI developed to help community leaders set practical goals and track progress toward enacting the HAA framework and improving community health in their settings. ACHI staff have followed up with attendees and will continue to touch base, provide resources, answer questions, and make connections with others in the HAA network.

At the regional meetings, local leaders in each community shared success stories. At the Jonesboro regional meeting, Dolores Sutterfield, child nutrition director of the Harrisburg School District, discussed the improvements the school district saw when it took steps to simplify its school lunch program. The district's implementation of Provision 2 of the National School Lunch Program brought \$500,000 into the district's budget, increasing the district's child nutrition program by \$42,000. It allowed twenty-six schools to combine their purchasing power, and parents saved \$200 to \$500 per year. Sutterfield spoke about the reduction of the free/reduced lunch stigma the district experienced and an increase seen in the number of students who ate lunch.

Erica Huffstetler, wellness program manager for the NEA Baptist Wellness Center, discussed the Center for Healthy Children, a program that serves as a platform to engage children in lifelong habits and equip them with resources to promote lifelong healthy choices. Each year, 80 – 100 children with a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or greater are engaged in a 12-week program that teaches, motivates, and guides overweight children and their families on proper nutrition and regular exercise for a healthy lifestyle.

Mayor Shirley Washington of Pine Bluff shared the success of the Saracen Landing Farmers Market and a five-mile walking trail alongside Lake Saracen. She discussed efforts to lower rates of poverty and obesity in Pine Bluff and the relationship between a community's health and its economy.

Lois Ashley, human resource manager for Superior Uniform Group in Eudora, also spoke about her company's extensive worksite wellness efforts. These include a "no smoking" policy, incentives to walk during the workday, an on-site 1-mile walking path, and regularly scheduled wellness checks. Positive results of these efforts have been seen in both the health and wellness

of employees as well as the company's insurance costs.

Finally, Tiffany Barnard, child nutrition director and president of the wellness committee for Drew Central School District, discussed their middle school's participation in a program that allowed the school district to provide activity trackers to students so that they could track their steps and increase physical activity. The program incentivizes students to meet physical activity goals by offering the ability to give charitably to children in third world countries. The school aligned classroom lessons with physical activity for students to accomplish these goals.

The Healthy Active Arkansas Statewide Learning Network is bringing together leaders from a diverse range of professions and communities to enable individuals and groups to learn from each other and develop their action plans together. These action plans help identify opportunities, map pathways, overcome challenges, and achieve momentum. Examples of completed action plans and a blank template to help jumpstart your community's action plan may be found at [www.achi.net](http://www.achi.net). If you would like to join the effort, please send us your contact information to get involved. Or better yet, send us your action plan to let us get you plugged in.

Healthy Active Arkansas seeks to empower members of the community to make changes in their own organizations, groups, churches, and families to make the healthy choice the easy choice. Each of us is a health policymaker—choosing items at the grocery store, taking care of our children and elders, and more. Our choices, such as buying fruit instead of chips or taking kids to the park instead of watching television, can add up to a healthier lifestyle. I hope that we will each take it upon ourselves to lead by example, to practice what we preach, and to continually strive to make a difference in the obesity epidemic in Arkansas. ■