

Community Leaders Take Action

5 simple steps to success for Community Leaders

Neighborhood organizations and faith-based groups are well positioned to initiate and coordinate activities to encourage healthy living and well being. Trusted leaders in communities and congregations can empower families and communities to make better choices to improve the health of our nation's children.

1. Help Parents Make Healthy Choices

Parents and community members can model healthy decisions about physical activity and nutrition. But in today's busy world, healthy choices aren't always easy. Parents and caregivers need a community of support. Here are some ways faith-based and community organizations can provide that support.

Ideas to Promote Healthy Choices

Pick one or two ideas that make sense for your community or congregation and brainstorm additional ideas to improve the health of your community. Ensure success by building on successful steps and expanding efforts over time.

- **Make Community Meals Healthier:** At community or congregation meals or potlucks, provide healthy selections, like fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains. People may unknowingly eat larger amounts when presented with a larger portion. Reduce portion sizes by eliminating buffet-style meals or simply using smaller plates.
- **Support Groups:** Challenge members of your community or congregation to form a support group for parents and caregivers who want to learn more about healthier food shopping or improving eating habits.
- **Community Cookbook:** Create a community or congregation cookbook that features healthy, locally grown food. Encourage all members to contribute their favorite healthy recipes or come up with a healthy twist on a classic dish.
- **Serve Healthy Drinks and Snacks:** Switch from sugar-sweetened beverages to 100% juice in education, child care or after-school programs. Replace sugary drinks in vending machine with water, 100% fruit juice or low-fat or fat-free milk. Use the HealthierUS School Challenge Competitive Food Calculator (<http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/hsmrs/HUSSC/calculator.html>) to determine if packaged snack foods are lower in fat, sodium and added sugars.
- **Teach Healthy Living to Kids:** Utilize youth education curriculum to encourage healthy habits connected with teachings in your community or faith tradition.

- **Encourage Breastfeeding:** Encourage mothers to start their children on a path to a healthy life by providing seminars or creating safe spaces for breastfeeding.

2. Advocate for Healthier Schools

Many children consume at least half of their daily calories at school. As families work to ensure kids eat right and get active play at home, children also need access to healthy food and have time for physical activity at school. With more than 31 million children participating in the National School Lunch Program and more than 11 million participating in the National School Breakfast Program, good nutrition at school is more important than ever.

Ideas to Promote Healthy Schools

Faith-based and community organizations can work with schools to help students adopt healthy habits by taking some of the following steps:

- **Partner with a School:** Have your organization or congregation partner with a local school or school district.
- **School Meal Programs:** Encourage families to enroll their children in school meal programs.
- **Start a Farmer's Market:** Work with community members to start a weekend farmers market at your facility, a local school site or neighborhood park.
- **Healthy Living Club:** Create a healthy living club to facilitate health programming in the schools and in the community. Assess healthy eating and physical activity policies and programs offered and establish a plan to work towards creating a healthier environment for children.
- **BackPack Program:** Partner with your local food banks to support the local Backpack Program, a program designed to meet the needs of hungry children at times when other resources are not available, like over weekends and during summer vacation.
- **HealthierUS School Challenge:** Identify strategies to support local schools in the HealthierUS School Challenge . The Challenge recognizes schools that take specific steps to improve their school environment by serving healthy foods, providing nutrition education and physical education.
- **Summer Food Service Programs:** Operate a summer food service program in partnership with local schools.

3. Help Children Get Physical Activity

Children need physical education, safe routes to walk and ride their bikes to school, and access to parks, playgrounds and community centers to get in 60 minutes of active play each day. Sports leagues, dance and fitness programs that are exciting and challenging will keep children engaged. Community organizations can take steps to increase opportunities for kids to be physically active – in school and in communities – and create opportunities for families to engage in physical activity together.

Ideas to Promote Physical Activity

There are many ways congregations and community based organizations can help our children get the daily physical activity they need. Here are some ideas to get started:

- **President's Active Lifestyle Challenge:** Help children take the President's Active Lifestyle Challenge by hosting the challenge within your organization (http://www.presidentschallenge.org/the_challenge/active_lifestyle.aspx).
- **Support Community Sports:** Support or start a community sports league, intramural sport, or physical activity club that is accessible to all community members – regardless of skill, ability, or financial resources. This is especially important in locations with few or no school-supported physical activity programs.
- **Safe Routes to Walk and Bike:** Ensure that children have safe routes to walk and bike in your community.
- **Organize Active Events:** Create a physical activity club in your congregation or community center. Organize a walk, dance, or bike-a-thon, 5K, field day, fun run, relay race, and come up with your own active event ideas.
- **Promote Recreational Facilities:** Partner with local community centers and schools to promote the use of recreational facilities, gymnasiums, playing fields, and playgrounds.
- **Open Your Facility:** Provide access to open green spaces, gymnasiums, recreation rooms, fellowship halls, and other meeting spaces for local schools or groups to increase opportunities for kids to participate in physical activity after school and on weekends.
- **BodyWorks Program:** Support or start a BodyWorks program in your community (<http://www.womenshealth.gov/BodyWorks/index.cfm>) – a program designed to teach healthy habits to adolescents and families.
- **CROP Hunger Walk:** Participate in a CROP hunger walk (http://www.churchworldservice.org/site/PageServer?pagename=crop_main) to raise awareness and funds for international relief and development and fight hunger locally.

4. Promote Affordable, Accessible Food

More than 23 million Americans, including 6.5 million children, live in low-income urban and rural neighborhoods that are more than one mile from the nearest supermarket. These communities, where access to affordable, quality, and nutritious foods is limited, are known as “food deserts.” In these communities, grocery stores that sell healthy foods such as fresh fruit and vegetables are inaccessible or healthy foods are too expensive.

Lack of access to proper nutrition is one reason why many people, including children, are not eating the recommended levels of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Food insecurity and hunger among our children is even more widespread. Faith-based and community organizations can help ensure that all families have access to healthy, affordable food in their communities.

Ideas to Promote Affordable & Accessible Food

Faith-based and community organizations can play an important role in providing access to affordable and healthy food options, here are some ideas:

- **Host a Farmers Market:** Host a local farmers' market at your organization facility or place of worship and advocate for hosts to accept SNAP benefits (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/ebt/fm.htm>).
- **Organize a Food Pantry:** Partner with your local food bank to host a food pantry at your organization or congregation with healthy options. Visit Feeding America to find the food bank closest to you (<http://feedingamerica.org/foodbank-results.aspx>).
- **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program:** Help families in your congregation or community sign-up for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- **Women, Infants and Children (WIC):** Promote participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) through outreach to pregnant women and new mothers.
- **Talk to Local Stores:** Talk to local convenience and retail stores about carrying fresh and healthy food options, including fruits and vegetables.
- **Summer Food Service Program:** Host the Summer Food Service Program at your organization's facility to ensure children have access to healthy meals when school is out of session.
- **Start a Community Garden:** Donate land at your community center or house of worship to members to grow food or start a congregational garden. Use the vegetable garden as an educational tool to teach children about healthy eating.
- **Hold a Healthy Food Drive:** Start a local produce exchange table or hold a food drive and encourage healthy food items. Teach members about preserving local food by organizing canning and preserving sessions at the community center, local school or place of worship.
- **Start a CSA Club:** Partner with local farmers to start a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) club at your organization or place of worship. Subsidize CSA shares for families with limited resources (<http://www.justfood.org/csa>).

5. Start a Community Garden

A vegetable garden is a great way to engage congregation and community members around healthy, local food. The garden will also serve as an educational tool to teach children that healthy eating can be fun and taste good.

Create a Committee

Begin by establishing a committee -- invite congregation or community members and neighbors to join. Get people energized!

Divvy Up Responsibilities

Before planting the first seeds, there are some important decisions to make. The garden committee will help make ongoing decisions to keep the community project sustainable. Duties may include: locating the site, testing the soil, working with the local agricultural extension office, building relationships with the local health department, assigning plots etc.

Find the Land

Look for a vacant plot that gets plenty of sun (at least six hours a day), is located near a water source, and has good drainage. Test the soil pH levels, your local university may offer this service at a low cost.

Secure the Site

Once you find a potential site, visit your local government office to find out who owns the land. If your organization is a non-profit or faith-based group, consider the land at your place of worship or facility. Also try looking to government agencies as partners in providing land.

The National Park Service, for example, allows groups to form community gardens in parks. Learn from other community gardens in the area to find out how they obtained their site and got started. After choosing a site, contact the landowner to obtain permission for the community garden plot and think about a multi-year lease for future seasons.

Design the Garden

Meet with the garden committee to determine how to set up your garden space. A shared garden will encourage gardeners' to work together throughout the season and share the harvest, while individual plots may help ensure dedicated participation. Consider factors such as irrigation and a shed for tools and supplies and trash removal. Here are some design ideas to get the committee started:

- A garden sign that displays partners and participants
- A community bulletin board
- A picnic table for gardeners to rest or enjoy the bounty of the land
- Children's areas with small plots or sand boxes
- Plants on the perimeter that are drought resistant but draw in pollinating friends like bees or butterflies

Start Planting

Start getting shovels in the ground! Clean up and clear the site to establish and assign plots. USDA's National Agricultural Library offers additional resources on starting your garden. Watch interest in the garden grow as community and congregation members begin to see vegetables grow.

Visit Let's Move! on Facebook and tell us about your community garden!