



Community Conversation

April 10 Meeting Summary



Executive Summary

The Early Childhood Obesity Prevention (ECOP) Workgroup, whose goal is for children to enter kindergarten at healthy weight, grew out of FSU COM's Patient Centered Outcomes Research Initiative and the Childhood Obesity Prevention Education Coalition (COPE). The ECOP group hosted their first community conversation Monday, April 10, 2017 at FSU's Turnbull Center. The purpose of the conversation was to educate participants on the breadth of the crisis and to generate ideas for prevention. A total of 64 people attended the event including representatives from the business, healthcare, faith-based, education and non-profit human service sectors.

The format of the conversation was carefully planned by the ECOP workgroup. The program included an overview of Leon County's early childhood obesity crisis and presentations from seven community members actively engaged in obesity intervention programs. The remainder of the program consisted of a facilitated discussion.

Key points that emerged from the conversation include:

- Within our community, there are many opportunities for physical activity, educational programs, and healthy food alternatives;
- Community engagement is critical, acknowledging that engaging people can be difficult and we need to increase our outreach efforts; and
- Education, increasing physical activity, decreasing availability of unhealthy foods, and policy changes are the key intervention strategies.

The community believes that solving the issue of early childhood (and adult) obesity requires a unified effort - everyone must commit to working together to achieve the goal. Residents need to be connected with available resources and new programs need to be developed and marketed to fill in gaps. With commitment, participants believe that "Leon County could be a shining example for other communities to follow."

In closing, participants were invited to write down a personal pledge towards addressing childhood obesity, to complete a program evaluation, and to provide contact information if they would like to engage with the ECOP work group. The attendees were overwhelmingly positive about their experience. Written comments were incorporated into the summary and 30 attendees reported wanting to remain involved with ECOP.

In summary, the ECOP Community Conversation Committee felt the event was a great success. By sharing data to support the childhood obesity crisis in our community, and hearing about successful programs and activities from "Community Champions", a rich discussion ensued that generated many viable concepts for prevention. The ECOP group will continue efforts to engage the entire community to ensure that every child in Leon County enters school at a healthy weight.

Background

Childhood obesity is one of the greatest health problems facing Leon County. In 2015, 28 percent of 1st grade Leon County students were overweight or obese. The rate is even higher for 3rd and 6th graders. Although no group is immune, Black and Hispanics children in Leon County have higher obesity rates than White and Asian children.¹ Obese children are at risk for numerous potential health problems, including type 2 diabetes, hypertension, sleep apnea, early puberty, depression, poor body image, low self-esteem, and behavior and learning problems.²

In addition, statistics show that overweight or obese preschoolers are five times more likely to be overweight or obese as adults.³ Leon County's obesity epidemic impacts all sectors of our community. Healthcare costs are substantially higher for obese children (and adults)⁴ and childhood obesity is associated with a higher school absenteeism rate.⁵ Likewise, 9 percent of workforce absenteeism costs are attributable to adult obesity, resulting in an annual loss of millions.⁶

Community Conversation Overview

The community conversation was designed to bring together citizens from various sectors (business, education, healthcare, community organizations, faith communities, and parents or grandparents) to discuss available community resources and brain-storm preventive strategies. The conversation began with a brief overview of the childhood obesity epidemic in Leon County followed by a short address from seven community “champions.” These champions briefly discussed what their companies or sectors are doing to prevent obesity. The rest of the conversation involved a facilitated discussion using pre-determined questions.

A total of 64 people, representing many sectors of our community, came together for this event. Participants sat at random tables of eight and each table was assigned a facilitator and a recorder to document the conversation. After discussing the first three questions, each table reported their thoughts to the entire group. Participants then joined different tables to discuss two additional pre-determined questions. Following the second set of questions, tables again reported their responses to the entire group. The program ended with a “call to action” where participants were invited to write what they are willing to do to address the issue on a publically displayed poster board. In closing, participants were asked to provide contact information if they wanted to be involved with ECOP's effort, 30 participants left their contact information. All participants left with a series of one page, sector-specific summaries highlighting the impact of obesity along with some intervention tips.

1 Wiman, A. (2015). BMI in Leon County School Children. Report available upon request

2 Pulgarón, Elizabeth R. “Childhood obesity: a review of increased risk for physical and psychological comorbidities.” *Clinical therapeutics* 35.1 (2013): A18-A32.

3 Obesity Society (2014). Childhood Overweight. Available from <http://www.obesity.org/obesity/resources/facts-about-obesity/childhood-overweight>

4 Finkelstein, E. A., Trogon, J. G., Cohen, J. W., & Dietz, W. (2009). Annual medical spending attributable to obesity: payer-and service-specific estimates. *Health affairs*, 28(5), w822-w831.

5 Echeverría, S. E., Vélez-Valle, E., Janevic, T., & Prystowsky, A. (2014). The role of poverty status and obesity on school attendance in the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 55(3), 402-407.

6 Ricci, J. A., & Chee, E. (2005). Lost productive time associated with excess weight in the US workforce. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 47(12), 1227-1234.

Champion Panel Summary

The ECOP champions represented a wide range of community sectors. Champion selection was based upon their leadership within their sphere of influence. The champion panel provided participants with an overview of intervention strategies currently being employed.

Donna Moran, Human Resource Director at First Commerce Credit Union, discussed First Commerce's workplace wellbeing program. This program encourages employees to adopt healthy habits. Donna highlighted how small changes can make a big difference. For example, the majority of employees have switched from drinking calorie laden soda to water and now only healthy food and beverages are offered at company functions.

Laurie Cox, Director of Physical Education for the Leon County School System (LCS) highlighted the importance of physical education on mental health and physical fitness and discussed the efforts of some schools to incorporate more activity and healthy habits into the school day. She offered congratulations to the LCS School Board for recognizing the importance of physical activity and implementing a new LCS policy calling for 20 minutes of physical activity daily for all elementary school students.

Marsha Kelly, Health Ministry Leader at Celebration New Life Tabernacle Church, discussed how her church has implemented several programs to encourage healthy behavior. She shared that her pastor had recently lost 40 pounds, inspiring the congregation to set a goal of reducing their collective weight by 2,000 pounds. In closing, Marsha thanked FSU professor emeritus Penny Ralston for bringing the heart healthy initiative to their church.

Talethia Edwards is a parent of seven children and is an active member of both the Bond Community Neighborhood Association and Bond Elementary School Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Talethia discussed how the education of parents is essential, offering herself as an example. In her family, she started by making small changes - cutting out juice and reducing carbohydrate intake. She shared how her own children "got used to it." The changes her family has made are working - a family member has lost weight and the entire family eats healthier.

Dr. J.C. Singh, pediatric physician with Tallahassee Primary Care Associates (TPCA), highlighted the importance of talking about weight with families, stating "we must address the issue." While acknowledging the conversation can be difficult, Dr. Singh indicated that the health effects of obesity are so detrimental that providers can not miss a single opportunity for education. In her own TPCA practice, she actively seeks opportunities to counsel her patients (and their caregivers) regarding health habits.

Michelle Gomez, Director of the FrenchTown Heritage Hub Farmers Market, discussed the farmer market, highlighting the positive impact the market has had for both the residents in the area as well as the vendors. Michelle also highlighted her efforts in developing food preparation classes. Finally, Ms. Gomez touted the importance of connecting people with resources, specifically mentioning the utility of the UF/IFAS Extension Family Nutrition Program.

Dykibra Gaskin, Public Health Nutrition Program Director at the Florida Department of Health in Leon County, Dykibra discussed the nutrition counseling offered through the Women

Infant and Children (WIC) early childhood nutrition program. Dykibra also highlighted the importance of breastfeeding and proper nutrition during infancy, indicating that research shows breastfeeding reduces childhood obesity risk.

In short, panel members provided an encouraging overview of local activities in Leon County and audience members appreciated their input. After the panel, champions joined a table and contributed to the facilitated discussion.

Facilitated Discussion Summary

Question: Our community plays an essential role in preventing obesity. What resources already exist in Leon County to prevent obesity?

Many resources were identified by conversation participants. Resources fell into three categories: physical activity, educational programs, and healthy food options.

Physical activity opportunities include: local parks, bike trails, community centers, Killearn Lakes youth gladiator program, Gulf Winds track club, family hours at the FSU Leach Center, school wellness programs, and a variety of other local exercise initiatives.

Healthy food opportunities include: farmer's markets, food co-ops, community gardens, Life-fit Vending machines, and the Seminole Manor food rescue program.

Educational program opportunities cited include: WIC, several Tallahassee Memorial Hospital programs, local cooking classes, 95210, Head Start, and UF/IFAS Extension Office.

Note: ECOP intends to make available a list of all resources identified during the Community Conversation.

Question: In what ways can our community specifically support families with young children to ensure they enter school at a healthy weight?

The responses to this question demonstrated overwhelming support for an increase in community engagement. While it was acknowledged that "it can be difficult to get underserved community members to use resources," respondents mentioned the need for community and peer-based programs, youth leadership programs, the use of social media, community advocates, and healthy lifestyle support groups in churches.

Participants recognized that cooperation is necessary and a consistent message from parents, schools, and healthcare providers is essential. Respondents emphasized the immense importance in home education, stating "introduce healthy foods to young children" and "teach meal planning and preparation skills." Schools and childcare centers were a recurring theme and it was acknowledged that "an emphasis on schools as a health place" is essential. Comments included, "bring health foods into schools," "don't use food as a reward," "bring healthy foods for fundraisers," and "provide education on reading food labels." One respondent mentioned the need for shared use agreements to allow for school playground use during non-school hours. Finally, participants mentioned that healthcare providers need to speak openly with patients about childhood obesity issues, beginning during pregnancy. One respondent stated, "Pediatricians need to make sure children know what to eat, and clearly express to the parent what the problem is and provide information on how to correct the problem"

Respondents demonstrated support for changing the landscape of the community through innovative marketing efforts and messaging. Ideas resulting from the conversation include the promotion and establishment of healthy concession stands, the promotion of healthier options through flyers and social media, the increased use of nutrition labels, the provision of healthy options at school lunches, and the incentivization of grocers, restaurants, and various companies to always provide healthy meal alternatives.

Question: What additional action can you take immediately to prevent youth obesity (either professionally or personally)?

Most responses centered on what participants can do personally, on an individual level, to prevent youth obesity. Responses included: purchase more healthy food, spend more time outside, limit vending machine use, limit eating at fast food restaurants, substitute healthy activities instead of cake to celebrate birthdays and holidays, decrease television time, garden, increase hydration, reduce cell phone usage, and be more aware of resources in Tallahassee.

A few respondents cited activities they can do professionally, such as encouraging movement in the classroom, promoting healthy fundraisers in schools (such as Booster-thon), collaborating with peers, informing policy makers on the issues, and attending ECOP meetings.

Question: If you were in charge of directing the prevention of childhood obesity in Leon County what would you do first?

Participants expressed the idea that “people don’t realize they are obese” because society no longer places adequate emphasis on obesity prevention and education, and does not foster a community focus on health. Thus, prevention efforts must focus on changing the culture in our county while also maintaining realistic expectations and focusing on achievable action plans and goals for individuals, families, educators, service providers, and employers.

Suggested preventive efforts fell into four categories: education, physical activity, decreasing availability of unhealthy foods, and policy changes. Regarding education, participants stressed that all community members could benefit from education, but particularly populations at risk. Education should focus on empowering individuals and inspiring change. Ideas included preconception education; parent education, breastfeeding education; health, nutrition, and cooking classes in schools; grocery shopping for healthier choices; and grandparent education. All programs should contain consistent information to avoid confusion and mixed messaging.

Ideas for increasing opportunities for physical activity included “establishing clubs to promote fitness in schools,” “more PE time in schools,” “expansion of the Champions program,” and “opportunities for all children to participate in sports.” One participant suggested developing a mobile phone application to help locate physical activity opportunities. Another suggested that we need to “encourage the city and county to promote healthy events regardless of sponsorship.”

Ideas to decrease access to unhealthy food included removal of vending machines and a redesign of shelves in the front of the grocery store. One participant called for PTAs (Parent Teacher Associations) to “hold parents accountable, there should be no unhealthy foods in our

schools.” In the policy arena, suggestions included calling on insurance companies to “pay us for being healthy,” a “sugar tax to discourage unhealthy consumption” and “mandatory health education classes in the schools.”

Question: In the future, what would Leon County look like if we solved the issue?

The community feels that Leon County has the potential to “be a shining example for other communities to follow.” Participants envisioned a county where a “wellness” lifestyle would be the social norm. We would have lower disease rates, lower medical costs, increased economic growth, and longer life spans. Solving the issue of childhood (and adult) obesity requires a unified community effort with each member committed to working together to achieve the goal.

Evaluation Summary

An evaluation survey was provided to all participants; 50 attendees completed the questionnaire. All participants “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the panel discussion was helpful and that the facilitated discussions provided useful information. Participants also “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the community conversation increased their interest in and commitment to early childhood obesity prevention. Respondents found the distributed materials helpful.

ECOP and its partners would like to thank the Florida Blue Foundation for their generous support, and Florida TaxWatch for donating staff and resources for this great event, and for preparing this Summary.

Thank you to our generous sponsors

