THE Good Exit

Do you have an exit strategy to set into action when you’re ready to leave?
BY ROCHELLE WILLIAMS

SPARTANBURG AND ITS PARTNERS FOCUS ON OBESITY

Spartanburg, South Carolina's Childhood Obesity Task Force isn’t afraid of setting tight deadlines while also aiming for high goals. The group is committed to reversing childhood obesity rates that have been climbing steadily in the county since the early 1980s. And task force members want to make enough of an impact so that rates start declining by 2015.

The task force is relying on a tried-and-true formula to work toward its goal. Members are tackling the biggest causes of the problem first and connecting the dots between organizations and agencies that are doing pieces of the work.

Childhood Obesity Addressed

The idea for the group was born in November 2008 when ICMA, the American Association of School Administrators, and the National Association of Counties, with funding from Leadership for Healthy Communities, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, conducted a workshop for Spartanburg and Greenville counties in South Carolina. After the session, representatives from a diverse group of organizations and agencies formed a community task force to address childhood obesity. This initial task force included staff from local foundations, a hospital system, institutions of higher learning, the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, the county parks system, and a handful of nonprofit organizations.

The task force spent the first year and a half defining the obesity problem in the community while partnering with the county’s seven school districts to determine the rate of childhood obesity. Task force members also educated themselves about research-based solutions to the problem, and the group supported a collaborative university-based research project concerning healthy eating.

In January of this year, the task force and its partners were awarded a four-year Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant to improve opportunities for physical activity and access to affordable healthy foods in four areas of the county. Going forward, task force members say they are concentrating on partnering with more people and organizations while also focusing the scope of their work. The group completed a strategic planning process this year and set five-year priorities.

The 2015 goal was adopted at one of these meetings. “We realize that we are setting the bar high,” says task force member Ana Parra, the executive director of the Hub City Farmers’ Market. “But if we had set a goal for 2020 or 2025, we would have sent the wrong message to the community. Spartanburg must begin making policy and environmental changes immediately so that children can begin to experience the health benefits as soon as possible.”

Task force members are in the process of forming work groups that focus on schools, preschools, after-school programs, the built environment, and access to healthy food. They are also creating a group that will work on obesity prevention–related media and marketing and a group that will concentrate on assessment.

“Now we are ready to put our boots on the ground with specific strategies at the policy and environmental level.”

Task force member Karen Fradua, a health educator with the state Department of Health and Environmental Control, says the work groups will help the task force make steady progress as it addresses the complex obesity issue, which can seem overwhelming.

Focus Is There

“We are becoming more focused on specific settings in the community,” Fradua said. “Whether it be preschools or access to healthy food, our committee work will give us more direction about the policy and environmental changes that we want to support.”

Pittman says the work groups will also help the group identify new members. “We are targeting specific areas, so we need experts who work in those areas to collaborate with us. In order for us to do our jobs well, we will need as many of those experts involved with each group as possible.”

More than anything, task force members seem emboldened by what they have accomplished in two short years and confident about how they can transform their community in the future.

“Our biggest strength hasn’t changed,” Fradua says. “We have strong partnerships. Agencies and groups work well together, which isn’t the case in a lot of communities. We have representatives from a wide variety of organizations, initiatives, and grassroots efforts who have worked well together in the past and continue to do so today.”

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