

Combating the Prevalence of Childhood Obesity in Illinois

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Childhood obesity is a serious health issue in the United States that puts children and adolescents at higher risk for poor health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that 1 in 6 children and adolescents in the U.S. are affected by obesity.¹ Between 2015 and 2016, approximately 18.5% of American children and adolescents (or 13.7 million) aged 2-19 years were obese.² In 2015, 15.4% of adolescents in grades 9th through 12th in Illinois were overweight and 12.6% were obese compared to 16.0% overweight and 13.9% obese at the national level.³ Although the rates of obesity among adolescents was lower in Illinois than national levels, there is still a cause for concern due to the adverse health impacts of obesity on this large population. A multifaceted approach must be taken to address this issue owing to the various factors that underlie the condition.

The CDC's Healthy People 2020 recommends promoting healthful diets, good nutrition, and physical activity to combat the prevalence of obesity.⁴ Therefore, it is vital that weight screening is routinely conducted in healthcare settings and sufficient follow-up care is provided to increase management of childhood obesity. Programs that increase regular physical activity in children, train providers documenting adolescent screening rates, and focus on healthy behaviors are also imperative. Furthermore, collaborations between public health organizations are crucial for creating sustainable programs that reduce childhood obesity in Illinois. For example, Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) implemented the Coordinate Approach to Child Care (CATCH) Program to bring schools together with families and communities to teach children how to be healthy throughout their lifetimes and reduce childhood obesity. Since 2004, IDPH has funded elementary schools to implement CATCH and reached more than 50,000 students and their families.⁵

Illinois Primary Health Care Association (IPHCA) was one of only four state PCA's to recently be awarded the Childhood Obesity

Management with Mind, Exercise, Nutrition....Do It! (MEND) Implementation Teams (COMMIT) grant (CDC funded) from National Association of Community Health Center (NACHC). MEND empowers children aged 7-13 to reach and maintain healthy a weight by helping families change their unhealthy attitudes about food and activity, staying physically active, learning how to choose nutritious foods, and maintain a healthy lifestyle.⁶ The COMMIT project will work to improve health outcomes and reduce risky behaviors of children who are overweight or obese at four Illinois health centers. In April and May 2018, participating health centers completed the operations and delivery trainings required for the MEND program. Participation involves virtual learning sessions that include expert faculty, peer learning, one-to-one coaching, and sharing data and lessons learned. The in-person training was hosted in IPHCA's Springfield Training Center with MEND trainers. IPHCA and AllianceChicago are currently assisting and preparing each health center for the implementation phase as well as the recruitment of 15 families. The partnership will also collect and synthesize project measures across the four health centers and continue monthly reporting and check-ins. IPHCA plans to share lessons that spread and sustain weight management program efforts in health centers.



Collaborative efforts and improving patient engagement using weight screening and follow-up care are only a few strategies that help manage childhood obesity. However, these strategies are critical not to overlook. Integration of routine weight screening with adequate follow-up care will certainly increase both provider and patient awareness with regards to patients' weight status and continued weight management needs. These strategies will continue to help children and adolescents reach their weight goals. As such, Illinois will see better health outcomes with respect to childhood obesity.

1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). Childhood Obesity Facts. Retrieved from

<https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html>

2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018). Childhood Obesity Facts. Retrieved from

<https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/childhood.html>

3 State of Illinois, IDPH. (2016). Chronic Disease Burden. Retrieved from

<http://www.dph.illinois.gov/sites/default/files/publications/publicationsohpmchildhood-obesity.pdf>

4 Healthy People 2020. Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity. (2017). Retrieved from Healthy People 2020. Nutrition, Physical Activity.

5 Illinois Department of Public Health. (2018). CATCH Program – Coordinated Approach to Child Health. Retrieved from <http://www.idph.state.il.us/about/chronic/catch/index.htm>

6 MEND Foundation. (2018). MEND stands for Mind, Exercise, Nutrition, Do It! Retrieved from <http://www.mendfoundation.org>