

EMPOWERING ONE COMMUNITY AT A TIME FOR POLICY, SYSTEM AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES TO IMPACT OBESITY

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Objective: This article describes Mayors Mentoring Mayors (3M), an initiative of the Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention (ArCOP), which expanded to five states to become the signature community initiative of the Mid-South Transdisciplinary Collaborative Center (Mid-South TCC) for Health Disparities Research.

Methods: The 3M program is an extension of the Growing Healthy Communities (GHC) program, which sought to build capacity within communities to reduce obesity by implementing policy, system and environmental (PSE) changes that support healthy living. GHC where the mayor was involved had the most significant changes toward better health. These mayors were recruited to share their successes, lessons learned, and best practices with their colleagues through a series of Lunch & Learns. Following the GHC and 3M models, a multi-state approach to expand 3M to five additional states was developed. ArCOP partnered with the Mid-South TCC to recruit mayors in the five states.

Results: Five Lunch & Learn events were held across Arkansas between March and May 2015, with a total of 98 participants (40 mayors, 37 community leaders, 21 guests). Each regional Lunch & Learn had 1-2 host mayor(s) in attendance, with a total of 9 host mayors. For the 3M regional expansion project, eight GHC Recognition Applications from five states were submitted. Five communities, designated as Emerging, were funded to implement GHC projects.

Conclusion: ArCOP successfully engaged mayors, elected officials, and stakeholders who can influence policy across Arkansas as well as in an additional five states in the Mid-South TCC region to implement

INTRODUCTION

Obesity has become a national epidemic and is now classified as a disease by the American Medical Association.¹ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 36.5% of Americans are obese.² Obesity-related conditions, including heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers, are some of the leading causes of preventable death. Individual-level approaches to diet and lifestyle behavior change have been largely unsuccessful in changing behavior at the population-level.³ Thus, there is increasing interest in programs that focus on changes at the environmental, system and policy levels.⁴ In 2003, Arkansas became the first state in the United States to enact a

law to create a comprehensive multi-pronged approach to bring families, schools and communities together to combat the epidemic of obesity.⁵

From initial multilevel initiatives, the Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention (ArCOP) was formed in 2007. Coalitions have become an important venue for addressing local health issues from multiple perspectives and have proven to be an effective forum for the implementation of the community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach.⁶ Through CBPR, community members and academic investigators can work together to define problems, and design, implement and evaluate interventions.⁶ The mission of ArCOP is to improve the health of Arkansas communities by increasing physical activity and

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healthy eating to reduce and prevent obesity, while ArCOP's goal is to increase the percentage of Arkansans across the life course who have access to healthy and affordable food and who engage in regular physical activity. The Coalition, open to anyone interested in a healthier Arkansas, currently has more than 2,000 members and more than 80 partner institutions.⁷ ArCOP supports many initiatives that address

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long-term, sustainable policy, system and environmental (PSE) changes in the community where people work, play, worship, learn and live (ie, social determinants of health).

One of the Coalition's leading prevention initiatives is Mayors Mentoring Mayors (3M), a collaboration between ArCOP and the Mid-South Transdisciplinary Collaborative Center for Health Disparities Research (Mid-South TCC).

As part of the Mid-South TCC's Expansion Coalition (see Fouad et al., on p. 277 of this supplement), ArCOP representatives applied for, and received, community capacity development funds in 2014 to implement the 3M project. ArCOP representatives attended monthly Expansion Coalition meetings with the Mid-South TCC academic investigators and other community organizations with funded projects to share progress and receive feedback on the project. The 3M project was deemed so impactful that the investigators worked with ArCOP to apply for additional funding to implement the initiative in all six states in the Mid-South TCC's region—Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee. The purpose of this article is to describe Mayors Mentoring Mayors, an initiative that began in Arkansas and expanded to five states to become the signature community initiative of the Mid-South TCC.

METHODS

Mayors Mentoring Mayors (3M)

The 3M program is an extension of a program founded in 2009, Growing Healthy Communities (GHC), which sought to build capacity within local communities to reduce obesity by implementing environmental and policy changes that support healthy living. Partnering organizations included the Blue & You Foundation, the Arkansas Department of Health, University of Arkansas Partners for Inclusive Communities, University of Arkansas for

Medical Science (UAMS) College of Public Health, and the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute. Arkansas communities interested in participating submitted a grant proposal and were required to form a leadership team that included at least three community decision makers (mayor, city board, directors of parks and recreation, development, etc.) and at least five community implementers and/or local stakeholders. The GHC program included a 3-day immersion training event launched in 2010, funds to implement proposed community work plans, and on-going technical assistance from ArCOP. As GHC expanded, in 2014 ArCOP opted to pilot three GHC recognition levels to annually recognize communities for their efforts in improving the health of their residents through PSE changes. The three levels are described in Table 1. Communities were required to submit an online application each year to: 1) retain GHC recognition status; 2) be awarded a recognition level (Emerging, Blossoming, Thriving); and 3) track data and PSE activities and changes from the communities. The GHC Recognition Levels were awarded on a monthly basis. Arkansas currently has 117 GHCs located throughout all five public health regions of the state that have completed the recognition level application for 2017. The awarded recognition levels include 82 Emerging, 21 Blossoming, and 14 Thriving. ArCOP approved 112 GHC projects in 2017, including 18 farmers' markets, 48 school and community gardens, 22 built environments and 24 work-site wellness projects to make policy,

Table 1. Growing Healthy Communities recognition levels

Recognition level	Description
Emerging Communities	Laying a strong foundation with a team of at least five individuals, including one elected official such as the Mayor. GHC teams are made up of diverse stakeholders who are interested in creating healthier communities.
Blossoming Communities	Build upon the requirements of Emerging Communities. <i>PLUS:</i> Provides a checklist of community highlights. Develops a strategic action plan that will help the community address concerns related to increasing access to healthy foods & physical activity. Documents success stories, publicized projects, and lessons learned.
Thriving Communities	Build upon the requirements of Blossoming Communities. <i>PLUS:</i> Demonstrates a positive change through data. Demonstrates environmental- and policy-level change.

system and environmental changes.

ArCOP found that communities with the most significant changes toward better health were the communities where the mayor was involved. These champion mayors saw the benefits of PSE changes first-hand, and were recruited to share their successes, lessons learned, and best practices with their colleagues across the state

through a series of Lunch and Learns between March and May 2015. In addition, an online 3M: Healthy Communities Toolkit, containing key resources intended to help guide communities with best practices and proven interventions, was developed (Table 2).⁸ The toolkit included: data that can be used to help make the case of how healthy initiatives

lead to healthier economies; tools for analysis, planning, and funding resources; and tools for city projects (eg, increasing access to healthy foods and physical activity; growing healthy kids; and creating healthier workplaces). In addition to the Mid-South TCC funds, ArCOP received funds to implement 3M from the 2015 County Health Rankings &

Table 2. 3M Healthy Communities toolkit

Topic	Description
Arkansas' Most Preventable Health Problem: Obesity!	Learn why focusing on health makes fiscal sense and see what YOU can do to help protect your city.
How to Get Growing!	The first steps to get started are to identify your current status and to assemble the right team.
What is Your City's Role in Growing a Healthy Community?	Elected officials across Arkansas are recognizing the economic and health benefits of jumping on this healthy community bandwagon!
Growing a Healthy Community with Access to Healthy Food!	Farmers' markets, SNAP, mobile markets, school and community gardens and so much more!
Growing a Healthy Community with Access to Physical Activity!	Complete streets, road diets, trails, joint use agreements, etc!
Growing a Healthy Workplace!	Learn about the CDC Worksite Wellness ScoreCard and other resources.
Growing Healthy Kids!	Learn about programs that help kids beginning in early childhood and following them through school.
Use Your Voice!	Learn what Arkansas mayors are saying about the importance of Growing a Healthy Community and add your voice!

Roadmaps, a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.

ArCOP partnered with the Arkansas Municipal League (AML) to recruit mayors throughout Arkansas. AML disseminated information about the 3M Lunch and Learn sessions as well as the GHC project. AML promoted ArCOP, GHC, and the 3M program via the AML listserv, articles and recognition in *City & Town* (an AML publication), conference sessions, and training certifications. In addition, ArCOP attended AML functions and state meetings.

The 3M Lunch and Learn sessions were held in each of the five Arkansas public health regions in the home communities of the champion mayors. Invitations were sent via Eventbrite, an online event registration platform, to mayors within the same geographic region by ArCOP and the champion/host mayor. At the completion of the Lunch and Learn sessions, a link to an online evaluation survey, developed using SurveyMonkey, was emailed to all participants. The survey included: items assessing the value of the 3M program (overall, toolkit, promotional items); relevance of information shared by host mayors (overall, no-cost / low-cost / investment projects); looked at the online 3M toolkit; and intention to implement projects inspired by the Lunch and Learn or toolkit. Responses for the first two items (value and relevance) were based on a 4-point Likert-type scale, ranging from no value to incredible value and nothing new/interesting to all new/interesting, respectively.

3M Regional Expansion

Following the GHC and 3M models, ArCOP developed a multi-state approach to expand the 3M program to the five additional Mid-South TCC states (Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee). ArCOP partnered with the Mid-South TCC Academic-Community Engagement (ACE) Core (see Fouad et al., on p. 277 of this supplement) to identify and recruit mayors in each of the five states. Mayors who agreed to participate completed, or designated someone, to complete the online Growing Healthy Community Recognition Application, which was adapted for each state.⁹ In addition to identifying the community's GHC recognition level, the application assessed the community's core team members (minimum of five), key stakeholders, health priorities, and current policy, system and environment changes.

After review of the GHC application, ArCOP held a live webinar and conducted a 2-day site visit with each community's core team. The webinar included a brief presentation of the GHC Model and the 3M program and an in-depth discussion of the community's GHC Recognition Application. During the site visit, ArCOP provided an in-depth presentation about the Arkansas GHC Model and the 3M Arkansas initiative, successes, and barriers, and the community's County Health Ranking data.¹⁰ In addition, ArCOP worked with each community to create a sustainability plan using the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) evidence-based guide, *A Sustainability Planning Guide for Healthy Com-*

munities.¹¹ The sustainability plan was a working document that included seven key elements: policy, systems and environmental change strategies; coalitions and partnerships; establishing a home for healthy communities work; building coalition members' skills, communication strategies; and social marketing strategies. Technical assistance was provided to each community after the site visit in identifying a feasible project to implement. Projects that included the requirement of including a policy, system or environmental change to create access to healthy affordable foods or increase physical activity were funded \$1,000. Furthermore, follow-up discussions were conducted with each community to collect additional information and resources to develop the online 3M: Healthy Communities Toolkit for each state.

A 1½ day 3M Summit was held at the end of the project in Arkansas and was hosted by the Arkansas GHC Mentor Mayors, who represented a socioeconomic status mixture of rural, urban and suburban communities. Each community's mayor or decision-making stakeholder and a community health champion were invited to attend the event and present their GHC project. In addition, Mentor Mayors highlighted their community's successes through no-cost, low-cost and economic infrastructure enhancements.

RESULTS

Mayors Mentoring Mayors

Five Lunch and Learn events were held, one in each of the five Arkansas

Table 3. 3M regional expansion

State	Population	Recognition level	GHC project
Alabama			
Community 1	26,511	Emerging	Mayors Walking Challenge
Community 2	761	Emerging	Community Garden
Kentucky			
Community 1	4,531	Blossoming	GHC Planning
Community 2	25,145	Blossoming	GHC Planning
Louisiana			
Community 1	391,495	Emerging	Built Environment
Mississippi			
Community 1	46,926	Emerging	Healthy Community Hub
Community 2	169,148	Emerging	Built Environment
Tennessee			
Community 1	29,350	Blossoming	GHC Planning

public health regions, with a total of 98 participants (40 mayors, 37 community leaders, and 21 guests). Each regional Lunch and Learn had 1-2 host mayor(s) in attendance, with a total of 9 host mayors involved. On the day of each event, the host mayor(s) welcomed participants and presented each community’s accomplishments as the main part of the program. The host mayors also shared their own successes, lessons learned, and best practices with their colleagues, including no-cost, low-cost, and larger investment changes that have made their cities healthier and more economically secure.

The evaluation survey was completed by 29 of the 98 participants, for a 29.6% response. Evaluation results of the Lunch and Learns indicated that the majority of respondents rated the overall program (78.6%), the toolkit (75%), and promotional items (63%) as an “incredible value.” Almost all of the respondents (89.7%) felt that the overall information presented by the

host mayors was all or mostly new/interesting. Regarding the projects presented, the majority of the respondents felt the no-cost (85.7%), low-cost (85.7%), and investment projects (79.3%) were all or mostly new/interesting. Nearly all respondents (96.6%) looked at the 3M toolkit, and 37.9% reported that they were already implementing projects inspired by the 3M toolkit or Lunch and Learn session, while 68.9% said they would implement healthy community projects in the immediate or near future.

3M Regional Expansion

ArCOP received a total of eight GHC Recognition Applications (Table 3) from five states. Five communities applied and were approved by ArCOP as Emerging Communities (two in Alabama, two in Mississippi, and one in Louisiana), and three communities applied and were approved as Blossoming Communities (two in

Kentucky and one in Tennessee). ArCOP conducted a webinar and a 2-day site visit for each of the five Emerging Communities. Each community submitted 1 to 2 GHC projects for a total of 13, and of those, 5 were funded \$1,000 each, which were the 5 Emerging Communities.

In Alabama, Community 1 was funded to implement a Walk with the Mayor campaign. Five Mayor’s Walks were held from April to August 2017. Residents were encouraged to form walking teams and to tabulate the miles they walked during the campaign. While only 18 individuals signed up for the team walks, dozens more participated in various walks around the city. The walking teams logged a total of 712 miles between April 1 and July 15. Community 2 is considered a food desert as defined by the USDA, and was funded to re-establish their community garden and launch a Wellness Center. In previous years, the fruit and vegetables from the community garden were distributed

to the elderly and those in need in the community. However, due to a drought and lack of technical and financial resources in 2016, the community did not have a successful garden. Funds were used to purchase seeds, plants, and garden tools.

In Mississippi, Community 1 received funds to develop and implement an information campaign (system change) that informs the community on health resources, programs, and policies. The community's Mayoral Health Council met three

community. The Council is drafting the system change plan and will use an official community-hosted webpage for disseminating health-related services, resources, and events. Community 2 received funds to improve a walking trail with lights for safety at night and exercise benches. However, the contact person is no longer at the organization, and efforts are being made to obtain updates.

In Louisiana, Community 1 was making improvements to a fitness trail to maximize the use of the path as well as improve resident's perceptions related to safety, conditions of the path, and amenities of the walking path. The community purchased five exercise benches, three trash receptacles, and nine permanent metal signs to enhance the amenities of the walking path. Funds were used to help purchase the metal signs. Four signs were trailhead signs that included the path length and instructions for downloading a QR code reader app, and five signs were installed at bench fitness stations and included workout instructions, graphic depictions, and a QR code with additional exercise instructions.

The 3M Summit was held in May 2017 in Arkansas. There were 77 mayors, elected officials, organizations and community members in attendance at the Summit from six different states. GHC project highlights were provided by Alabama Community 2, Mississippi Community 1, and Louisiana Community 1. Five presentations were given by the Mentor Mayors who focused on the successes, challenges, and lessons learned related to implementing PSE changes within their communities.

DISCUSSION

Coalitions have become a central component of efforts to improve community health by working to create PSE changes with few resources. ArCOP developed the 3M project, which is a scalable and sustainable model that can be implemented in other communities and states. ArCOP successfully engaged community leaders (i.e., mayors, elected officials, and stakeholders) who can influence policy across Arkansas as well as an additional five states in the Mid-South TCC region to implement obesity PSE prevention/reduction strategies. On average, two host mayors, eight mayors, and seven community leaders attended each Lunch and Learn session. For the 3M Regional Expansion, ArCOP engaged eight communities in five states, and successfully funded five projects in Emerging Communities. These communities selected, planned, and implemented strategies that worked best for their community with a small amount of funding and technical assistance from ArCOP. Similar to other research, interventions developed by the stakeholders often have greater relevance and feasibility than do interventions developed by researchers.¹²

Similar to ArCOP's experience, research has shown that involving key stakeholders in the planning and implementation of the intervention is essential for investment in the program, and is required for long-term program success and sustainability.^{4,13-15} Furthermore, the CDC also emphasizes the importance of local governments in creating physi-

ArCOP's GHC and 3M programs provide an opportunity for mayors, elected officials and stakeholders to confront obesity in their community by addressing PSE strategies most relevant to them.

times (May to July) to discuss: opportunities for providing the community with health-related information; how to deliver the messages; how to brand the delivery; and development of a motto (eg, "Because you matter"). The Council decided to utilize the logo and information from a defunct website that was designed to address health issues and opportunities in the

cal activity and food environments that promote health for their communities. By working to improve the built environment (ie, parks, bike lanes, sidewalks, farmer's markets, healthy food retailers, and community gardens), government officials can lay the foundation for improved health and well-being of their residents.¹⁶ From previous experience with the GHC program, ArCOP learned that having the mayor involved with program implementation led to more changes in the community toward better health.

Public health efforts to accelerate obesity prevention are increasingly being focused on PSE approaches. However, in order for government leaders to address PSE changes, they need access to data to understand the current conditions of their communities as well as measures to track progress.¹⁶ In developing the 3M toolkit for each state, ArCOP included data that each community could use to select the most appropriate PSE strategies for their community. A similar approach was implemented by another project focused on promoting healthy eating and non-sedentary behavior utilized data on health outcomes and behaviors of the population from National Health surveys to provide insights and evidence to policy makers, which played an important role in the decision-making process in the local municipal government.¹³

CONCLUSION

The United States continues to face enormous economic and health

challenges related to obesity. The Mid-South TCC in partnership with ArCOP empowers communities to make long-term, sustainable changes. ArCOP's GHC and 3M programs provide an opportunity for mayors, elected officials and stakeholders to confront obesity in their community by addressing PSE strategies most relevant to them. Dissemination of ArCOP's programs are an important step in contributing community-based approaches to the evidence base for practice in obesity prevention.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interest to report.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Research concept and design: Betancourt, Eady, Thompson, Bateman, Fouad; Acquisition of data: Betancourt, Ridgway, Rockenbach, Eady, Thompson, Fouad; Data analysis and interpretation: Betancourt, Thompson, Fouad, Schoenberger; Manuscript draft: Betancourt, Ridgway, Rockenbach, Thompson, Bateman, Schoenberger; Acquisition of funding: Betancourt, Fouad; Administrative: Betancourt, Ridgway, Rockenbach, Eady, Thompson, Bateman, Fouad,

Schoenberger; Supervision: Betancourt, Ridgway, Eady, Bateman, Schoenberger

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