

# Results Matter

## Childhood Obesity Prevention Program



### Childhood Obesity Prevention Program Achieves Meaningful Lifestyle Changes in Four Georgia Communities

This edition of *Results Matter* highlights findings from the evaluation of Healthcare Georgia Foundation's Childhood Obesity Prevention Program (COPP). In 2013, the Foundation launched the COPP to support community-based coalitions addressing the conditions that affect children's ability to live a healthy lifestyle in Georgia. Four COPP grantees pursued various strategies to increase access to opportunities for physical activity and were instrumental in guiding communities to implement local policies that support a healthier lifestyle.

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## Childhood Obesity Prevention Program: Overview

The Foundation awarded grants totaling \$2,307,000 in the COPP from 2013-2016 to support four nonprofit organizations in Georgia, each affiliated with an existing community-based coalition, to improve local policies and environments in ways that make healthier lifestyle choices easier for all members of their respective communities. Four grantees were selected based on a competitive funding announcement. Each of the grantees listed below represented vastly different communities in Georgia and all had existing coalitions working on obesity issues.

- Cobb Health Futures Foundation – Cobb2020 Coalition (Cobb County)
- Cook County Family Connection – (Cook County)
- Georgia College and State University Foundation – Live Healthy Baldwin (Baldwin County)
- YMCA of Coastal Georgia-Healthy Savannah – (Chatham County)



Above: COPP grantees, Technical Assistance Providers, and Healthcare Georgia Foundation staff members

*Georgia coalitions made substantial progress in achieving policy and environmental changes.*

The grant awards included a six-month planning period that resulted in the creation of Community Action Plans followed by a 30-month implementation phase. The grantee awards were staggered across three years: in year one grant awards totaled \$150,000 per site; in year two the amount was \$100,000 and; in year three the grant awards were \$75,000 per site. The Foundation also awarded \$1,007,000 in additional grants to provide the grantees/coalitions with technical assistance in the areas of policy, evaluation, and communications. The **Georgia Health Policy Center** at Georgia State University provided technical assistance on policy and advocacy to the COPP grantees. This includes site visits in the local communities, individual consulting sessions, bi-weekly conference calls and webinars. They were identified to serve in this capacity based on their previous experience as policy technical assistance providers.



The Partnership for a Healthier Cobb County, Cobb2020, is a coalition of individuals and community organizations dedicated to promoting healthy lifestyles and improving the delivery of health services in Cobb County. Located within the Atlanta metropolis, Cobb County is the fourth largest county in Georgia. Using the evidence-based "Alliance for a Healthier Generation" framework for COPP, Cobb2020 implemented school wellness councils in six elementary and middle schools in South Cobb County to improve physical activity and nutrition. They also established several new **shared use agreements** with schools, churches, parks and recreation, and other organizations to increase and promote areas for physical activity in Cobb County.

**Cook County Family Connection (CCFC)** is a community coalition that supports active living and healthy eating habits of children and families

## Cook County Family Connection

living in rural Cook County in south Georgia. As the most rural COPP grantee, CCFC project goals were to (1) improve the capacity of coalition members to lead Policy, Systems and Environment (PSE) changes to support obesity prevention within their individual sectors; (2) implement evidence-based health communication and social marketing campaigns to change public perceptions and to influence social behaviors toward healthier and active lifestyles; and (3) lead efforts to plan, create, and implement new policy and environmental changes to increase access to healthy foods and physical activity. To achieve these goals, CCFC conducted **leadership and collaboration trainings** with coalition members, implemented a youth club to engage youth in policy and environmental change strategies, conducted **health communications** events to educate local residents about healthy lifestyle choices, developed two new **community gardens** and **expanded a playground** at a local chapter of the Boys and Girls Club, and implemented two short-term **joint use agreements** for a youth summer camp.



**Healthy Savannah** is a coalition comprised of public, private, and nonprofit organizations dedicated to promoting healthier lifestyles in the city of Savannah and Chatham County. The YMCA of Coastal Georgia was a key partner and fiscal agent for the COPP project. For COPP, Healthy Savannah implemented multiple policy/advocacy campaigns including:

A city of Savannah Complete Streets ordinance; Savannah/Chatham County Public School System adopting new design guidelines that require walking and biking to school become a part of the design on new and retrofitted schools and; the City of Savannah/Chatham County city council earmarked funds to create the engineering design, and construction of a five-mile Truman Linear Park Trail which will link two dozen communities, 16 schools, shopping districts and Memorial University Medical Center and Savannah State University.

**Live Healthy Baldwin**, led by the Center for Health and Social Issues at Georgia College, is a coalition of organizations established in 2009 to reverse childhood obesity in Baldwin County. For the COPP, Live Healthy Baldwin was instrumental as a lead organization advocating for the passage of local policies including a complete streets ordinance and implementation plan for Milledgeville, GA; and secured \$1.2 million to complete the Safe Routes to School infrastructure project. In addition, the community received an All-Star Community Award at the inaugural Health Georgia Awards ceremony; Milledgeville was awarded the bronze Bicycle Friendly University status from the League of American Bicyclists and the Bike-Walk Baldwin 501 c(3) advocacy group was established.



## CROSS-SITE EVALUATION

### PURPOSE

The purpose of the COPP Cross-Site Evaluation was to examine the overall effectiveness of the program in achieving outcomes of interest across all four grantee sites, particularly with regard to changes in community leadership and coalition capacity, changes in policies and environments, and changes in health behaviors, social awareness and social norms at the community level.

### METHODOLOGY

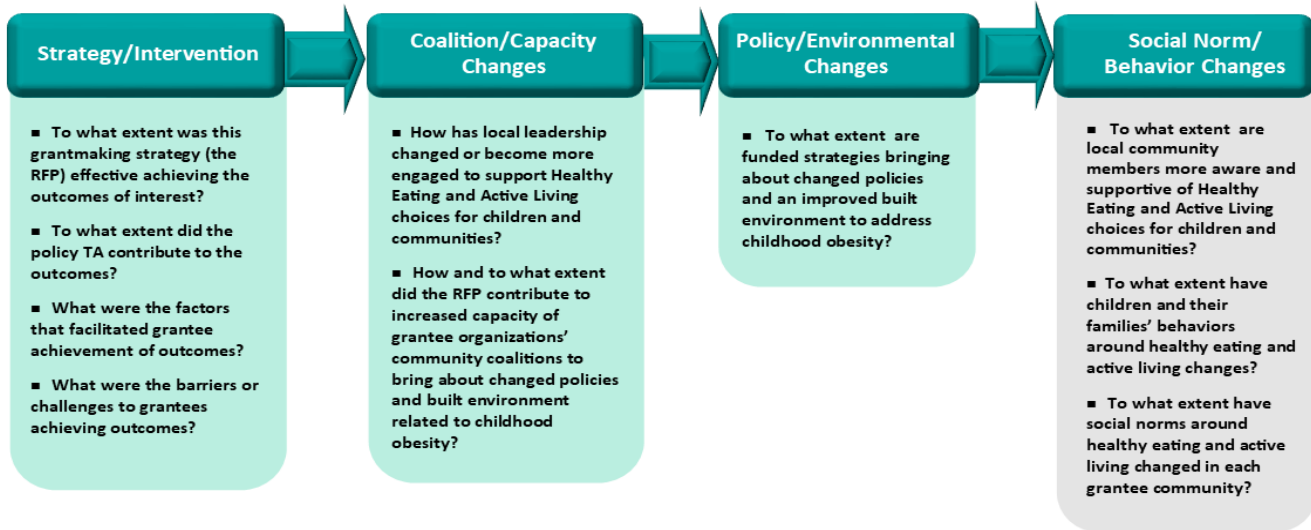
As cross-site evaluation consultant, ICF employed a longitudinal, mixed-methods evaluation design to address the COPP evaluation questions using four data sources:

1. **Key Informant Interviews** were conducted annually with the grantee program director, at least one coalition member, and the lead evaluator from each site. Policy TA providers and Foundation staff were also interviewed each year. Interviews informed questions related to the overall effectiveness of the program, the role of TA in achieving outcomes, changes in leadership and coalition capacity, and grantee achievements and lessons learned.
2. The **Coalition Member Survey** was administered in years two and three to all active members of each coalition to examine changes in coalition capacity from a larger sample of coalition members.



3. The **Policy and Environmental Monitoring Tool** was used to monitor quarterly progress on planned milestones identified in their Community Action Plans for each policy and environmental intervention chosen by the grantees. Each milestone was coded as *not yet started*, *in progress* or *complete*. In addition, the tool noted implementation challenges, solutions, and modifications to the plans over time.
4. The **Community Intercept Survey** was administered in year 1 and year 3 of the program to measure changes in health behaviors, social awareness and social norms at the community level. The Evaluation Team collected a total of 400 surveys (100 per grantee site) at each time point. Evaluation team members approached adults at grocery stores and/or community events to request their participation in the five-minute survey.

## COPP Cross-Site Evaluation Questions



## RESULTS

Evidence from the cross-site evaluation demonstrated that the COPP was effective in improving coalitions' capacity to change policies and environments that may prevent or reduce childhood obesity. Additional findings from the cross-site evaluation are described below:

### POLICY AND ENVIRONMENTAL OUTCOMES

- COPP and the community coalitions demonstrated steady progress toward completing policy and environmental intervention milestones identified in their Community Action Plans at the start of the program each year, culminating in 75% of environmental milestones completed and 78% of policy milestones completed by the end of the project.
- The most notable environmental accomplishments included the completion of a 1.5-mile trail network connecting schools in Baldwin County, creation of two seasonal gardens in Cook County, and expansion of a playground in Cook County.
- Policy achievements included the adoption of two Complete Streets ordinances in Savannah and Baldwin County, 11 shared-use agreements in Cobb County, two short-term joint use agreements in Cook County, and six wellness plans were developed and implemented by school wellness councils in Cobb County. The Savannah/Chatham County new design guidelines required walking and biking to school as part of the design of new and retrofitted schools.

### HEALTH BEHAVIORS AND SOCIAL NORMS

- Self-reported physical activity among children increased over time, as did strengthening activities among adults. Although these changes cannot be directly attributed to COPP interventions, these are positive findings that are consistent with the goals of the initiative and supported by interventions designed to promote physical activity in each community.
- Fewer than 20% of community members were aware of the coalitions' childhood obesity prevention program in their community. This finding was consistent over time. Those respondents who were aware of the obesity prevention program in their community estimated that about a third of residents were also aware of the program.



[Above: COPP grantees Cook County (top left), Live Healthy Baldwin (top right), Healthy Savannah (bottom left), and Cobb 2020 (bottom right) presented their successes and challenges to Healthcare Georgia Foundation in August 2016.]

## STRATEGY/IMPLEMENTATION

- Policy technical assistance (TA) from the Georgia Health Policy Center was instrumental in shaping and supporting grantees implementation of policy and environmental change interventions.
- Staff turnover among grantees, lack of buy-in among stake holders, and challenges working in schools were common barriers to achieving outcomes.
- Staff turnover among grantees, lack of buy-in among stakeholders, and challenges working with schools were common barriers to achieving outcomes.
- Relationships with stakeholders, local leaders and within coalitions, as described by grantees, were a dominate theme among facilitators to achieving outcomes in the final year of the program.

## COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND COALITION CAPACITY

- COPP grantees demonstrated increased engagement with a wide range of local leaders over the course of the initiative. A number of local leaders played critical roles in advancing the goals of the coalitions and reflected increased understanding and support for policy and environmental change interventions.
- Coalitions demonstrated improved capacity over the course of the program by implementing and achieving policy and environmental outcomes and by strengthening relationships with local leaders within and beyond the coalition.
- Community leaders and stakeholders improved their understanding of how policies and environments affect health.

## CONCLUSIONS

- The Foundation's COPP grantmaking strategy - funding coalitions; including a planning period; providing robust TA, peer learning, and monitoring - was effective in increasing the capacity of community coalitions to change policies and environments that aim to reduce and prevent childhood obesity.
- The changes produced in coalition capacity and local leadership through the COPP initiative appear to be sustainable. All coalitions will pursue many of the policy and environmental activities that were in progress at the end of the grant.

- Grantees and coalitions made substantial progress in achieving policy and environmental changes and in understanding the nature of this type of work—furthermore, that progress appears highly sustainable and likely to continue.
- COPP strategies benefit entire populations and services designed to achieve healthy lifestyles.

## RIPPLE EFFECTS

All four coalitions were able to report unanticipated positive outcomes of their work or “ripple effects” that went beyond the original goals of the program. For example, asthma-friendly status was achieved by a school system; a community engagement model has been replicated in South Carolina; a local church in a rural community provided transportation to summer camp; and local city officials assumed ownership of policy achievements. The grantees intend to continue in lead roles to achieve sustained **policy, systems, and environmental** work.

### KEY LESSONS FOR PURSUING POLICY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

- **Policy and environmental change takes time.** Set realistic expectations for what can be accomplished during a given program period, policy and built environment changes often require 3–5 years. Investing time up front on building relationships with key stakeholders can pay large dividends down the road when barriers are encountered.
- **Policy and environmental change requires flexibility.** The nature of this work is unpredictable, and no one can control all of the factors that determine the course of a given policy or environmental goal. Rigid adherence to a plan that is not working is futile. Consider a new route when barriers are encountered.
- **Stakeholders bring their own needs and motivation to a project.** Take time to listen and leverage what matters to the people and groups working with you. As one grantee stated, *“We attempt to understand what each individual partner is looking for when they come into the process. Then turn around and make certain every individual is receiving the return on investment that they need, specifically to stay included and committed to the project.”*
- **Data are powerful for making the case for change.** Gathering data to understand community perspectives can be useful in designing communications or policy/environmental strategies. Using data to demonstrate needs and/or progress to stakeholders can be instrumental in addressing stakeholders’ interests and developing buy-in for interventions.
- **Frequent and strategic communication with stakeholders is critical.** Develop a communications plan for leadership, stakeholders, and the broader community. Adapt formats for different audiences (e.g., Facebook, reports, newsletters). Follow up after meetings and recognize others’ contributions. Continue to reach out and share your story, even with non supporters.
- **Relationships are a key to success.** Relationships undergird every lesson described above. This work requires support and action from many stakeholders who can influence changes within communities; success depends on the ability to connect, engage, motivate, and align multiple stakeholders to work toward a common goal.
- **These interventions require individual effort with relatively low costs** compared to efforts focused on individual behavior changes.

# Foundation Reflections

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## ABOUT RESULTS MATTER:

Healthcare Georgia Foundation is strongly committed to improving program outcomes through ongoing evaluation. *Results Matter* is published as part of the Georgia Evaluation Resource Center (ERC) and its suite of evaluation tools and services tailored to help nonprofit health organizations achieve better outcomes by enabling them to understand their performance, revise and plan accordingly, and communicate results to their stakeholders. For more information, visit [georgiaerc.org](http://georgiaerc.org).

## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS

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Investing in childhood obesity and health policy has been a priority for Healthcare Georgia Foundation from the beginning of the Foundation's grantmaking. Health Policy and Childhood Obesity were among the earliest Foundation grants in direct response to nonexistent funding in Georgia to support health nonprofits to engage in prevention strategies to address high rates of childhood obesity and strengthen the existing health policy capacity in Georgia. This early support by the Foundation paved the way for the creation of the Childhood Obesity Prevention Program (COPP). By linking policy and childhood obesity prevention strategies to community engagement via established health coalitions, Healthcare Georgia Foundation was able to maximize its financial investment and leverage previous funding to state level policy organizations to deliver a multi-year funding program intended to move policy, systems, and environmental work to the forefront of local communities.

The funding strategy employed was designed to determine the benefits of funding local community-based coalitions as a strategy to address childhood obesity using policy and environmental interventions as the basis of their work. The COPP initiative allowed the Foundation to emerge as a thought leader regarding the next generation of obesity prevention work (i.e. local policy vs individual programs). This investment has increased the Foundation's visibility on this issue in the state and among our regional/national philanthropic partners. It has increased capacity in each community to advocate, convene, evaluate, and establish policies that will have a positive impact on communities. The significance of capacity building and leadership cannot be understated, especially when working with coalitions. The COPP grantees were able to increase public sector engagement, partner participation, and expand leadership roles.

Organizations engaging in policy, systems, and environmental work are a critical component to improving long-term health outcomes in childhood obesity prevention. Programs alone can't sustain long-term outcomes without strong state and local policies to support their efforts. The Foundation's investment has revealed many lessons for future grantmaking. The design of funding programs could benefit from a planning phase at the frontend of multi-year funding programs. Incorporating an exit strategy in the design phase, and building technical assistance support specific to the needs of the initiative can be key elements to assist grantees' success with individual projects. An additional lesson identified is developing cross-site evaluation questions earlier to ensure stronger alignment to the outcomes of the funding program. Childhood obesity continues to be a public health challenge in Georgia. Using the lessons learned from this funding program should serve to better inform investments from the Foundation as well as from other funders with a vested interest in the health of Georgia's children. ■