

Are We Sweet Enough?

The Need: Access to Healthy Foods

Childhood overweight and obesity increase the risk for serious health problems in adulthood including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, asthma, and cancer, and San Mateo County's children face slightly higher rates of overweight and obesity compared to California's averages.^a Within the county, South San Francisco (47%), San Bruno (43.9%), Daly City (39.2%) and Redwood City (37.4%) have the highest rates of children overweight and obesity.^b North County diabetes rates are 13.9% higher than the countywide average of 10%.^c

Back in 2013, these numbers alarmed leaders of Youth Leadership Institute (YLI), a statewide youth development organization with over 15 years of work in San Mateo County. Feeling a sense of urgency to reduce the growing number of overweight kids and witnessing the health issues in their families, young leaders organized a diverse coalition called Youth Organizing San Mateo County or Yo! Mateo. In 2015, with the support of Get Healthy San Mateo County's Community Implementation Funding, YLI launched the "Are We Sweet Enough?" campaign. The campaign aimed to increase access to healthy foods and beverages in Daly City and South San Francisco in order to help decrease the rates of diabetes and obesity.



"As youth, many of us do not take into account the health risks which come with consuming sugary drinks one after the other. I think that it is very important for the youth to understand these potential health risks in order to create lasting healthy habits and prevent long term diseases." -Lester Gutierrez, YLI Daly City Leader

The Solution: Making the Healthy Choice, the Easy Choice

Promoting policies that reduce the consumption of sugary drinks can help prevent obesity. Knowing this fact, the Yo! Mateo coalition embarked on a multi-year effort to work with the City Council of Daly City to adopt a resolution to support state policy to label sugary drinks as unhealthy, and later to adopt a Kids' Healthy Meals Ordinance. This policy has been shown to lower the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages among kids by requiring restaurants to replace sugary beverages with healthier options such as water and low-fat milk as the default beverage in children's meals. On December 8, 2018, the City Council of Daly City adopted the Kids' Healthy Meals Ordinance becoming the first city in the county and the seventh in the entire state to adopt such policy.

The Essential Ingredient for Success: Empowerment, Partnerships and Persistence

Youth-Led-Action Research: The Are We Sweet Enough? campaign was envisioned and led by youth leaders. They gathered and analyzed health data, conducted community mapping of food retailers and an assessment of kids' meals and default drinks in restaurants that offer combo meals. They designed public opinion surveys, learned the policy options available to reduce child obesity, and enhanced their communication skills to share their message with a wide audience. And ultimately they convinced decision makers to advance a health-informed policy.

Strategic Alliances: Youth leaders also understood they needed allies in both decision makers and organizational partners. They cultivated relationships with councilmembers and identified decision makers who wanted to champion the ordinance. YLI partnered with Public Health Advocates (PHA) that brought their policy expertise to the campaign after successfully passing similar ordinances in other cities in California. They worked with youth in Jefferson Union High School's Key Club and St. Augustine's Youth Ministry Choir to help educate the public and collect support cards in the community. YLI and PHA strategically partnered with Get Healthy San Mateo County, Family Health, the American Heart Association, and a number of local pediatricians to advance a public health message.

Same Goal, New Strategies: Since 2013 when YLI started working on issues to promote access to healthy foods in North County, different policy and programmatic solutions were explored to achieve the desired goal while balancing the interests of decision makers and business owners. Through workshops with youth, communication campaigns targeted to the general public, and one-on-one meetings with decision makers, city staff, and business owners, young leaders found a viable policy mechanism, the Kids' Healthy Meals Ordinance.

Challenge: Youth and the Goliath

Tackling the consumption of sugary drinks is not an easy task. Proponents of sugary drinks can be a powerful industry, which can be hard to work against. Yet, the youth, partners and decision-makers worked hard and persisted in support of children's health. YLI continued to explore policy options with partners and enhanced their partnership with PHA and local youth leaders.

Looking to the Future: Build on the Momentum

A robust implementation of the Kids' Healthy Meals ordinance is critical to the success of the policy. Daly City will ensure business owners and consumers are aware of the new law that goes into effect July 1, 2018 and will set up the adequate enforcement mechanisms to implement the policy. YLI and youth leaders continue to focus on addressing health inequities across key communities in San Mateo County with the goal of building out similar youth coalitions to advocate for health-promoting policies.

Endnotes

^a2016 Community Health Needs Assessment. Page 27. Retrieved from: http://www.pamf.org/mpsh/forms/CHNA_MPSH_16-18.pdf

^bOverweight and Obesity Among Children by California Cities 2010. Retrieved from: <http://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/publications/Documents/PDF/children2010fs-jun2012.PDF>

^c2013 Community Health Needs Assessment: Health and Quality of Life in San Mateo. (Page 36). Retrieved from: <http://www.smchealth.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2013fullreportlow.pdf>