

Healthy Eating Active Living campaign taking hold in Virginia

HEAL initiative attracting a new type of local government commitment

THE VALUES OF COMMUNITY health closely align with the values of municipal leaders, the business community and families. Communities that are healthy for children, families, the elderly, businesses and employees are places where people want to live, work, raise a family and age. This kind of community values quality of life, encourages activity and offers healthy food options across neighborhoods. And the investments in these healthy environments pay dividends: Healthcare costs are reduced, workplace productivity is increased, and academic performance is enhanced. Children in these communities grow up, go to college, and return to the community to work and raise families. How many of the children in your schools today will be living in your community in 10 or 15 years?

There is a natural connection between local planning and health; now more than ever it is essential to recognize and build on that mutual interest, particularly as an obesity epidemic overtakes the nation. The small town of Haymarket in Prince William County has identified the intersection. The success of a recently completed streetscape project, which allows pedestrians and residents to safely walk, bicycle or jog the length of the town under a lighted sidewalk, has inspired Haymarket to create even more connections throughout the town.

“Since its completion, we see people daily taking advan-

tage of the ability to walk throughout the town,” said Town Manager Brian Henshaw. “As we strive to become more walkable, we believe that this provides a direct linkage to successfully calling ourselves a HEAL community.”

HEAL is shorthand for the Healthy Eating Active Living Cities, Towns & Counties Campaign for the Mid-Atlantic, an initiative with that supports local policymakers to ensure that as many Virginians as possible live high-quality, healthy lives. The HEAL campaign, which now includes 14 Virginia local governments, is specifically designed to help local policymakers proactively foster healthy environments by adopting and implementing local policies that increase access to healthy eating and active living, the two components that help combat obesity.

Obesity is an epidemic from which Virginia is not immune. Obesity rates in the Commonwealth have nearly doubled in the past 15 years; in 1995 the rate was 14.2 percent and by 2011 it was 29.2 percent. This trajectory is projected to reach nearly 50 percent of adults by 2030. Obesity is associated with a higher risk of several chronic diseases, including Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke and some cancers. In addition to the costs of treating these conditions, obesity causes decreased worker productivity, increased absenteeism and increased workers’ compensation claims.



Healthy communities enjoy reduced healthcare costs, increased workplace productivity and better academic performance.



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Obesity is a preventable disease. Its main causes are poor nutrition and lack of physical activity. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Trust for America's Health estimate that by reducing the overall average body mass index (BMI) by as little as 5 percent, the Commonwealth could avoid nearly 107,000 cases of Type 2 diabetes, more than 118,000 cases of obesity-related cancers and almost 443,000 cases of coronary heart disease and stroke in just 10 years. The reduction is predicted to lead to healthcare savings of more than \$6 billion in 10 years and \$18 billion in 20 years. These are savings that can fund economic development, debt obligation repayment, and capital projects. The benefits also include a healthier, more productive workforce.

What does a 5 percent reduction in BMI look like? This means, for example, a six-foot tall, 200-pound person would need to lose about 10 pounds to reduce their BMI by 5 percent. BMI is calculated using a person's weight and height to measure body fat; adults with BMI between 25 and 29.9 are overweight; adults with a BMI of 30 or greater are obese.

Although many decisions about eating better and moving more are the result of an individual's choice, those decisions are not made in a vacuum. An individual's health choices are made based on the options available. For example, if the local grocery store does not provide fresh, affordable, healthy food, a family on a budget has limited choices. If neighborhoods are not safe, it is unlikely residents will walk in their communities or use community parks to be active. Vending machines in office buildings provide convenience, but if they only offer sugar-sweetened beverages and unhealthy snacks, a healthy choice is not an option.

Without opportunities to make healthy choices, the environments in which we live, work, learn and play contribute to the obesity epidemic. As leaders elected and appointed to influence and develop the policies that shape community environments, local policymakers have an important role to play in addressing this epidemic. By recognizing that planning decisions affect health, local leaders have the opportunity to support families, children and businesses in their decisions to be healthy.

"When we discussed joining the HEAL program, there were concerns that it would require the City to tell citizens what to eat and what not to eat," said Staunton City Council Member Eric Curren. "Program advocates were easily able to show that HEAL was not about taking away anybody's Big Gulp, but was instead just about helping to level the playing field for healthy local food in a marketplace dominated by pack-

HEAL initiative

aged, convenience and snack foods from big national brands. Actually, it was about giving eaters more choice, not less, and empowering citizens with information to make smarter choices about their eating and overall wellness."

A similar sentiment is shared by Cindy Curtis, deputy city manager in Virginia Beach. "We celebrate an individual's right to make choices," Curtis said. "However, without knowledge of what your real choices are and what the impact of your decision could be, an individual is not making an informed choice. Our HEAL campaign centers on providing choices of healthy food, whether it be in a restaurant that has designated certain menu items as meeting a healthy criteria or whether it is at a farmer's market brought to a local library. The healthy choice should be an easy choice; however, it can't be made if it is not offered or accessible."

The HEAL campaign

The HEAL Cities, Towns & Counties Campaign pairs the unique power of local government with the public health expertise of the Institute for Public Health Innovation (IPHI). IPHI is the public health institute representing the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia. It has worked in strategic partnership with the Virginia Municipal League since 2012. Local governments' participation in the HEAL Campaign is free, thanks to generous support from the Kaiser Permanente of the Mid-Atlantic States. "We believe that healthy policies are integral to healthy communities," says Celeste James, Director of Community Health at Kaiser Permanente of the Mid-Atlantic States. "With this investment we are increasing opportunities for Virginians to live healthfully in communities that support wellbeing."

Local leaders across the United States are now recognizing that HEAL policies should be a part of short- and long-term city and town planning as a key component to reducing health care costs, creating safer community environments, improving quality of life and attracting economic development.

"At the Institute for Public Health Innovation, we know that policies that address healthy living at a local level are critical to addressing the personal, collective, and economic impact of obesity in our region," said Marisa Jones, director of the HEAL Cities, Towns & Counties Campaign for the Mid-Atlantic. "We're confident we can make great headway by partnering with local officials to benefit the lives of their residents and employees."

While there are a number of other initiatives across the Commonwealth aimed at reducing obesity and preventing chronic disease, the HEAL Cities, Towns & Counties Campaign is focused on supporting local governments to adopt and implement policies that shape the environments in which residents and employees make decisions about physical activity and nutrition. The HEAL campaign coordinates with other initiatives aimed at individual-level interventions and encourages them to take full advantage of resources available to them to prevent obesity and chronic disease.

The steps to joining the HEAL Cities, Towns, & Counties Campaign are outlined below, and begin and end with a commitment to improving the health, wellness and prosperity of your community.

How to become a HEAL community

Step 1: Articulate your vision

Identify goals that help your community achieve its vision of being a healthy, prosperous community. Pass a resolution stating one to three policy goals your municipality will work on to make it easier for citizens to eat better and move more. The HEAL campaign has a draft resolution available on its website that local governments can use as a starting point. HEAL staff can help you select evidence-based policies that are known to work and that are a right fit for your community.

Step 2: Share the news

Once a resolution is passed, you are an official member of the campaign – celebrate it! You will receive a HEAL logo to use, media relations assistance and recognition at Virginia Municipal League events.

Step 3: Get free help

Free technical assistance includes access to sample policies, strategies for successful policy adoption, regional trainings, webinars, on-site meetings with HEAL staff and phone access to HEAL staff. Visit www.healcitiesmidatlantic.org for useful information to learn more about HEAL, including a policy menu, draft resolutions, fact sheets and webinars related to healthy eating and active living. You can also follow HEAL on Twitter at @HEALMidAtlantic.

Step 4: Adopt policies

Use the HEAL resolution as a roadmap to become a healthy, prosperous community, and advance the policies your community resolved to work on in its HEAL resolution. Take advantage of the resources available to you as a HEAL city, town or county to advance your community's goals.

Step 5: Implement policies

As a member of the HEAL campaign you will be eligible – for the first time ever – to apply for funding to help kick start your policy implementation.

No matter the size, location or demographics of your community, the HEAL Cities, Towns & Counties Campaign can work for you. While our current menu includes more than 50 policies, the following are policies any community can adopt under the three main HEAL topic areas of Active Communities, Healthy Food and Workplace Wellness:

- Complete Streets
- Including health goals/walkability/bikeability into the Comprehensive Plan
- Develop procurement standards for nutritious foods
- Workplace Wellness initiatives

The City of Virginia Beach is the most recent member of the campaign, adopting a HEAL resolution in March.

“The HEAL staff have provided technical assistance, guiding us through the process to develop a resolution framework that

clearly outlines our strategies for improving access to healthy nutrition in Virginia Beach,” said Department of Public Health Director Dr. Heidi A. Kulberg. “Serving as a clearinghouse of information about existing, successful programs, the HEAL campaign enabled our city team to focus resources on tailoring programs to meet the needs of our citizens rather than spending time reinventing the wheel. Additionally, working on this campaign has heightened the awareness and involvement of diverse leaders throughout the city. The city council’s adoption of our HEAL resolution signifies to all that the health of our citizens and visitors is vitally important to our *City for a Lifetime*.”

Does your community already have a policy that supports active communities, healthy food access or work place wellness? Share it by contacting the Campaign Director Marisa Jones at mjones@institutephi.org and talk with the Campaign Team about becoming a HEAL member eligible for free technical assistance.

First time HEAL grants available


This spring, the HEAL Cities & Towns Campaign is offering \$40,000 in grants to HEAL cities and towns for implementation of HEAL policies. Funding is provided by the campaign sponsor, Kaiser Permanente for the Mid-Atlantic States. The official application will be posted on the HEAL website (www.healcitiesmidatlantic.org) on May 4, 2015, and will close on June 25, 2015.

All cities that join the HEAL Cities & Towns Campaign by June 25, 2015 will be eligible to apply for these grant funds. Two types of funding are available:

- Kick-Off grants up to \$500 (up to 6 awards)
- Implementation Grants will be between \$5,000 and \$9,000 (4-6 awards)

See the HEAL website for more information on the types of projects that could be funded by HEAL grants.

More about IPHI

The Institute for Public Health Innovation (IPHI) creates partnerships across sectors and cultivates innovative solutions that improve health and well-being for populations and communities across Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia. Its work strengthens health service systems and public policy; enhances the environments and conditions in which people live, age, work, learn, and play; and builds organizational and community capacity to sustain progress. Find IPHI on the web at: www.institutephi.org; on Twitter at @InstitutePHI; and on Facebook at InstitutePHI. 

About the author

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These 4 cities and towns walk the talk

HERE ARE JUST FOUR EXAMPLES of local government initiatives across Virginia aimed at improving the collective health of communities. Both of the cities and both of the towns described are participants in the HEAL Cities, Towns & Counties Campaign.

City of Charlottesville – Complete Streets

With a focus on equitable development, the City of Charlottesville is more than just a college town. The most recent update to the city’s comprehensive plan included a focus on better connectivity, increased pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and economic assessment of land use and zoning, particularly around the West Main Street corridor, a colonial thoroughfare connecting the University of

ensure that all transportation agencies within the city routinely plan, fund, design, construct, operate and maintain streets according to the Complete Streets principles with the goal of creating an attractive, connected, multimodal network that balances the needs of all users.

The City of Charlottesville understands the positive role that good pedestrian and bicycle facilities play in attracting population growth and sustainable economic development. Speaking about the city’s adoption of its HEAL Resolution, City Councilwoman Kristen Szakos said, “It’s helped show how every decision we make has some impact on the physical well-being of our citizens, and to make those decisions consciously in an effort to make Charlottesville a healthier place for everyone.”

Making travel choices more convenient, attractive and safe means people do not need to rely solely on automobiles and can replace congestion-clogged trips in their cars with heart-healthy walks or bicycle trips.



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Virginia to downtown Charlottesville and the surrounding neighborhoods.

In February 2014, City Council reaffirmed its commitment to this goal by adopting a Complete Streets policy titled, *Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares: A Context Sensitive Approach*. Complete Streets principles highlight that streets serve a greater purpose than for motorists alone. Complete Streets are streets for everyone. They are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities. Complete Streets make it easy to cross the street, walk to shops and bicycle to work.

Charlottesville’s Complete Streets policy was adopted to

City of Richmond – Health in All Policies

In addition to passing a Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) resolution promoting active communities, healthy workplaces and increased access to nutritious food in January, Richmond City Council also unanimously adopted a Health in All Policies (HiAP) resolution to ensure the incorporation of health and health equity into its policy-making processes. While the HEAL Cities, Towns & Counties Campaign incorporates eating better and moving more in policymaking, HiAP takes that concept even further, by considering all health impacts of decisions made by all aspects of local government.

Recent research published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* has suggested that only 10 percent of health is determined by medical care alone. Other aspects that influence health outcomes include social, economic, genetic and environmental factors. When such elements are considered in policymaking and in long-term planning decision processes in sectors other than health, decision makers can explicitly address health while also achieving the non-health agency mission. A team of Richmond city departmental leaders will be formed to implement the HiAP framework across all departments, agencies, and offices.

“These are great additions to the things we are already doing for our residents in conjunction with the Healthy Richmond Campaign,” said Mayor Dwight C. Jones, who served

as co-patron for both pieces of legislation. Chris Hilbert, City Council vice president and co-patron of the HiAP resolution, shared the sentiment. “Our residents will benefit tremendously from this process of incorporating health equity into all policymaking decisions,” he said.

The Institute for Public Health Innovation provided technical assistance in the development and adoption of both the HEAL and HiAP legislation. “What Richmond has done is historic, as only a handful of localities across the country have passed HiAP legislation,” noted Dr. Michal Royster, vice president of IPHI.

Town of Crewe – HEAL Taskforce

With a population of just over 2,300, the Town of Crewe in Nottoway County is one of the smallest municipalities in the HEAL Cities, Towns & Counties Campaign, but its vision for a healthy and prosperous community is reflective of any other member: It sees a healthy community that is equally desirable to visit, own or operate a business and raise a family. It was also the first HEAL community in Virginia to join the campaign in January 2013.

The town was introduced to the HEAL initiative after encountering the Institute for Public Health Innovation at a VML conference in 2012. Upon identifying similar goals and vision with the campaign, the town immediately embarked on adopting a policy for the creation of a HEAL Taskforce. The mission of the taskforce is to identify obstacles to providing healthy eating and active living opportunities to residents and visitors, and proposing improvements for long-term healthy lifestyles.

The adoption of the policy creating the taskforce has institutionalized the existence of a body of stakeholders who continuously assess the resources and vulnerabilities to creating a healthy and productive community. In addition to increasing opportunities for healthy eating and active living, the taskforce’s goals include engaging and communicating with residents about HEAL efforts.

“Crewe’s HEAL initiative is a grassroots effort facilitated by town leadership,” said Town Council Member Phil Miskovic. “We bring to the table citizens, businesses, and faith-based and community organizations in a cohesive effort to identify problems and create solutions for achieving a healthier community. We seek to inform the uninformed, engage the informed, and cultivate the activity of the engaged.”

Outreach efforts have led to specific HEAL goals such as creating a crosswalk across busy Route 460 to connect the business district to the community park; promoting fresh, local foods available in small businesses; and creating senior recreation leagues for older residents.



Town of Leesburg – Healthy Vending

Upon visiting Leesburg, it is readily apparent that the state’s largest town has set forth its vision to be a walkable, healthy and prosperous community. The Loudoun County town’s main streets are home to vibrant, thriving locally-owned businesses, which create a place where people want to spend time and money. The town is home to numerous



Leesburg adopted a Healthy Vending Policy to offer healthier snack options in vending machines on town property.

parks, which house recreation activities as well as enable residents and visitors alike to enjoy its natural green space.

After learning about the HEAL Cities, Towns & Counties Campaign at a VML Annual Conference in Arlington several years ago, Council Member Katie Sheldon Hammler took action.

“I brought the HEAL Campaign back to our council because I knew that one of the fastest rising line items in the Town of Leesburg’s budget – 12 percent in FY15 – is our staff health care costs,” said Hammler, a member of the VML Executive Committee. “Promoting fitness and nutrition is part of our fiscal responsibility to our taxpayers.”

Taking note, the town decided to focus the HEAL Cities, Towns & Counties Campaign goals on creating a municipal workplace conducive to employees making healthy decisions about nutrition and physical activity while at work. To support that, Parks and Recreation staff participated in a HEAL campaign webinar, Healthy Meetings and Vending to Improve Workplace Wellness. Equipped with tools and knowledge on how to improve the nutritional content of foods sold in vending machines and concessions, the Leesburg adopted a Healthy Vending Policy to increase the percentage of nourishing foods served in vending machines on town property. This policy ensures that municipal employees and visitors to town-owned buildings have the opportunity to make healthy choices about snacks when they are at work and on the go.

... Compiled by *Kate McGrail*