

Rural Community Works Together to Stay “Fun and Fit”



“[The] Community Guide recommendations are flexible and broad enough to be used in small rural villages to promote change.”

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More Information

State of Alaska, Center for Health Data and Statistics
www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/infocenter/topics/overweight.htm

The Community Guide: Task Force Recommendations On Obesity Control and Prevention
www.thecommunityguide.org/obesity

Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, CDC
www.cdc.gov/nccdp/dnpao

Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report: Recommended Community Strategies and Measurements to Prevent Obesity in the United States
www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/rr/rr5807.pdf

Obesity affects the health of millions of Americans, putting them at increased risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, and even some cancers.¹ Alaskans living in rural Alaska are significantly more likely to be obese compared to those in all other regions of the state.² One community in rural Alaska is making strides to address obesity by using findings and recommendations of the Community Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) in *The Guide to Community Preventive Services (The Community Guide)*. Under the guiding vision of a cross-sector partnership, the Hoonah community is working to address obesity by expanding access to places for physical activity and engaging the community in outreach activities.

Obesity in rural Alaska is on the radar

Hoonah is a rural community in southeast Alaska with approximately 850 full-time residents, the majority of whom are Alaskan Natives. “Data collected from schools in our district revealed that 27 percent of the general student population is overweight and 18 percent are obese,” said Sonja Engle, RN, itinerant public health nurse for the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (ADHSS). Motivated to help reverse these numbers, Ms. Engle and local community partners sought comprehensive yet adaptable tools they could use to help address this issue.

Workgroup charts path for partnership

Because Hoonah is accessible only by ferry or small charter plane, Ms. Engle relied on existing partnerships and cultivated new ones within Hoonah to get the ball rolling. She gathered an initial workgroup comprised of representatives from the school district, the Hoonah Indian Association, and the local health clinic. They reviewed findings and recommendations on *The Community Guide’s* website to assess what would work to increase recreational activities, promote better nutrition in the school and community-wide, and increase public awareness of obesity-related issues. This group in turn expanded its outreach to other members of the community and local organizations. As more became involved, the workgroup grew into a larger, active coalition of citizens and local agencies currently known as the *Hoonah Fun and Fit Partnership*. It now represents all segments of the Hoonah community including residents, community leaders, and organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, Parents as Teachers, Hoonah Organizers for Peace and Equality, community youth centers, and local and state government agencies.

Hoonah heads in the right direction

Once established, the *Hoonah Fun and Fit Partnership* began to identify strategies they could put into practice within the community. As part of their meeting agenda, workgroup members discussed evidence-based approaches described in *The Community Guide*, which helped shape the group’s goals. Specific findings and recommendations from *The Community Guide* that were considered included:

- Community-wide campaigns to promote physical activity
- Creation of or enhanced access to places for physical activity combined with informational outreach activities
- Social support interventions in community settings



www.thecommunityguide.org

What is *The Community Guide*?

The Guide to Community Preventive Services (The Community Guide) is an essential resource for people who want to know what works in public health. It provides evidence-based findings and recommendations about public health interventions and policies to improve health and promote safety.

The Community Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force)—an independent, nonfederal, unpaid body of public health and prevention experts—bases its findings and recommendations on systematic reviews of the scientific literature. With oversight from the Task Force, scientists and subject-matter experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conduct these reviews in collaboration with a wide range of government, academic, policy, and practice-based partners.



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- Enhanced school-based physical education
- School-based programs promoting nutrition and physical activity*

Planning sessions guided by evidence-based approaches helped the group see that solutions were achievable. “The most useful thing about *The Community Guide* is that it has evidence-based strategies that can be pointed out to the group,” explains Ms. Engle. “It helps the community to identify their issues and then come up with adaptable strategies to solve them.”

Strategy moves one village, influences another

Within the first year of the workgroup’s creation, members collaborated to broaden access to recreational activities and events, promote better nutrition, and alert people to the real impact of obesity in Hoonah. Key strategies included:

- Working with the school district to provide and promote better nutrition in the schools, including finding out how to get locally caught fish on the school lunch menu, and encouraging school-based vegetable gardens
- Supporting the local high school in providing regular open gym hours
- Encouraging community involvement in physical activity programs, such as the Raven-Eagle Walking Challenge competition, free dance and exercise classes, and “Girls on the Run,” a national program that encourages girls to develop healthy lifestyles through running
- Creating a list of “fun and fit” activities for the residents of Hoonah
- Providing information and ideas to promote access to the city’s walking and biking trails
- Supporting the reopening of the local pool, which had been closed for 3 years
- Identifying opportunities to increase ice skating and cross-country skiing activities for residents

The workgroup’s actions rallied the entire community to combat obesity. Candy Keown, director of Human Services for the Hoonah Indian Association and a member of the *Hoonah Fun and Fit Partnership*, commented on the Raven-Eagle Walking Challenge, “People are excited about walking. It’s having a good effect on the community.” Residents report healthier lifestyles and increased physical activity. Marti Lee, a *Fun and Fit* participant, noted, “I feel much better about my health now that I have lost some weight, move more, and choose healthier food on a regular basis. The partnership has brought a positive change in our community.” Hoonah’s response has influenced a nearby village to start a similar movement to combat obesity in their community. *Hoonah Fun and Fit* plans to collect additional data to fully measure the impact of their efforts throughout their community.

Lessons Learned

- **Shape your program’s direction with proven strategies.** The *Hoonah Fun and Fit Partnership* gained momentum by using Task Force findings and recommendations to unify their vision, efforts, and collaborative responses to address obesity.
- **Engage a broader audience.** Key influencers can mobilize a community through strategies that generate awareness of an issue and help create a common solution.
- **Apply strategies from *The Community Guide* to match your community.** The Hoonah partnership carried out the recommendations in *The Community Guide* that best fit the needs and resources of their small rural Alaskan community.

*The Task Force issued “insufficient evidence” to recommend school-based programs promoting nutrition and physical activity. This does not mean these interventions do not work. It means that more research is needed for the Task Force to determine if they are effective. The Task Force encourages those who use interventions with insufficient evidence to evaluate their efforts.

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Overweight and Obesity—Economic Consequences. www.cdc.gov/obesity/causes/economics.html. Accessed on March 26, 2012.

²State of Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. The Burden of Overweight and Obesity in Alaska, Summary Report. www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/chronic/obesity/pubs/obesityburden_2009.pdf. Accessed on March 26, 2012.