Despite efforts to combat overweight and obesity, the American waistline continues to expand. In the last 20 years, obesity rates among adults and children have increased dramatically and remain high in communities across the country. Counties served by the Western Maryland Health System (WMHS) are no different; rates in these areas have risen steadily. To make a sustainable impact on obesity in their region, WMHS implemented a systematic health strategy that leveraged funding and partnerships. The findings and recommendations of the Community Preventive Services Task Force (CPSTF) in The Guide to Community Preventive Services (The Community Guide) provided the basis for an action strategy centered on behavioral, social, and environmental change. WMHS used an evidence-based approach to strengthen grant applications to obtain funding.

Local Health System Seeks Long-Term Solution

WMHS, a comprehensive healthcare organization serving six counties in Maryland, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania, faced a growing overweight and obesity problem. Between 2001 and 2008, according to Nancy Forlifer, director of Community Health and Wellness at WMHS, "The percentage of obese adults increased from 24 to 29 percent, and in 2011, 20 percent of the school-aged children were obese." WMHS set up activities to promote weight loss such as community contests, but they found that results from these programs were temporary." Evidence showed that these areas were not the best place to put our time, efforts, and funds," says Ms. Forlifer. "We looked to convert these short-term improvements to long-term success by involving community partners and using interventions proven to work."

Initial Funding Setback Helps Focus Efforts

Determined to make a lasting impact on the community, WMHS sought an evidence-based approach to promote weight loss and prevent obesity. They recruited community partners to help assess local needs and develop strategies. Together with partners, WMHS applied for a grant with CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield to fund these activities. According to Ms. Forlifer, CareFirst was unwilling to fund the planning phase and denied the application, stating, "You do the research on your own, and then resubmit for funding to implement your program." Undeterred and unfunded, that’s exactly what WMHS and its partners did.

Using CDC’s Recommended Community Strategies and Measurements to Prevent Obesity in the United States, WMHS conducted a community health needs assessment. The staff evaluated environmental health factors, such as the numbers of grocery stores and miles of sidewalks, and interviewed local officials and other leaders to better understand how health-related policies affect the community. After analyzing the data, WMHS selected interventions that would have the greatest impact.
Lessons Learned

- **Invest the time to gather the evidence.** Taking time to assess their community’s needs and identify evidence-based interventions made the difference in obtaining the needed funds. Their persistence and use of an evidence-based approach eventually led to success.

- **Apply The Community Guide.** Use the CPSTF recommendations from The Community Guide to support and enhance other programs and interventions that will benefit your community. Combined with data specific to the target population, the project’s design and reach may be more effective.

- **Combine interventions and partners.** The combination of behavioral, social, and environmental strategies can impact a population more strongly than a single strategy. Involving partners in different community sectors can improve the reach of each intervention. A varied approach increases the likelihood that the message will take hold within the community.