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Introduction

In an effort to prepare children for success, the Junior League of Northern Virginia (JLNV) has evolved its focus area to combating childhood obesity. The JLNV is committed to empowering families to make healthy lifestyle choices through the promotion of nutrition and physical activity education. In 2014, the JLNV formed the Advocacy and Public Affairs (APA) Committee, to spread awareness of JLNV's community activities and new focus area as well as to partner with organizations and individuals in the community. This paper outlines the policy priorities of the JLNV based on the work and research that APA and the previous Issue Based-Community Impact Ad Hoc Committee completed in the past two years.

Research

Over the past 30 years, the obesity rate among children in the United States has tripled. Childhood obesity is now a nationwide epidemic, costing an estimated 14 billion dollars annually. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 17 percent of children aged 2-19 years of age are classified as obese, and almost one-third of children are overweight.

While all demographic groups are impacted by childhood obesity, obesity rates vary based on age, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and level of education. The overall childhood obesity rate has remained relatively constant since 2003-2004, with a slight decline noted in the 2-5 year old age group. The age group most affected by obesity and related health impacts is the 12-19 year old demographic, indicating that obesity rates continue to rise throughout childhood. Hispanic and African-American youths are significantly more likely to be overweight or obese compared with their non-Hispanic Caucasian and Asian-American peers. Lastly, children from low-income families, and families with a less educated head of the household are more likely to be obese than their peers.

In Virginia, the rate of childhood obesity has continued to rise over the past decade. Reaching 27.4 percent in 2012, Virginia ranked 24th in the nation for childhood obesity, a rate just below the national average of 27.6 percent. In Northern Virginia, 1 in 5 children are affected by obesity. Despite this figure, counties in Northern Virginia (including Arlington, Fairfax, Loudon, and Prince William) currently rank in the top 25 counties nationwide for both health factors (i.e. what influences the health of the county) and health outcomes (i.e. how healthy the county is). However, despite recent successes, much more can be done to prevent childhood obesity and promote a healthy lifestyle and better nutrition for children in Northern Virginia communities.

Policy Opportunities

Reducing the rate of childhood obesity is an important policy objective at the federal, state and local level, and in communities across Northern Virginia. Addressing childhood obesity in Northern Virginia requires a comprehensive policy agenda that promotes both physical activity and healthy nutrition, with multiple stakeholders across multiple sectors and that considers the relationship between childhood obesity and various socioeconomic and racial and ethnic demographic factors.

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (<http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/solutions.html>) multiple solutions and strategies exist for states, communities and parents to help make the healthy choice the easy choice for children, adolescents, and their families. States and communities can support physical activity and healthy nutrition by:

- Assessing the retail food environment to better understand the current landscape and differences in accessibility to healthier foods.
- Providing incentives for supermarkets, farmers markets, or other retail models to establish their businesses in underserved areas or to sell and promote healthier foods.
- Expand programs that bring local fruits and vegetables to schools; Put salad bars in schools
- Pursue a “Spectrum of Opportunities” to help early care and education facilities in their jurisdictions support optimal nutrition, breastfeeding, physical activity and screen time standards and practices.
- Increase access to drinking water and other healthier beverages in early care and education facilities.
- Support breastfeeding in hospitals and the workplace.
- Create and maintain safe neighborhoods for physical activity and improve access to parks and playgrounds.
- Support quality daily physical education in schools and daily physical activity in child care facilities.

The CDC has developed partnerships, documents and toolkits to support each of the above mentioned strategies for states and communities to utilize in pursuit of addressing childhood obesity prevention.

The CDC also recommends multiple sectors for implementing strategies to addressing childhood obesity (<http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/researchproject.html>) these include:

- Health care centers
- Schools
- Early care and education centers
- Communities

Recently the American Heart Association (AHA) and the Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) Foundation came together to launch the ‘Voices for Healthy Kids’ initiative to develop and support a policy agenda for states and localities to promote physical activity and healthy nutrition. (http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Advocate/Voices-for-Healthy-Kids_UCM_453195_SubHomePage.jsp) This collaborative work has identified six policy levers to successfully address childhood obesity. These levers include:

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- Smart School Foods – Improving the nutritional quality of snack foods and beverages in schools.
- Marketing Matters – Protecting children from marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages
- Active Places – Increasing access to parks, playgrounds, walking paths, bike lanes, school gyms and other safe places to be active.
- Health Drinks – Reducing consumption of sugary beverages.
- Food Access – Increasing access to affordable healthy foods.
- Active Kids Out of School – Increasing children’s physical activity levels when they are out of school.

AHA and RWJ have developed multiple resources to support states and localities working on the six policy levers. The state of Virginia has developed a state level team to support this work.

In the state of Virginia, the Virginia General Assembly in 1999 established the Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth (VFHY) to promote healthy living habits and reduce and prevent youth tobacco use and childhood obesity statewide. - See more at: <http://www.vfhy.org/#sthash.bHsJkVRZ.dpuf> Because of the Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth’s great success at reducing youth tobacco use and helping youth in Virginia learn to make positive, healthy lifestyle choices, the Virginia General Assembly voted unanimously in 2009 to give VFHY responsibility for preventing and reducing childhood obesity in the Commonwealth. VFHY founded Prevention Connections (PC) to expand resources and activities to promote healthy eating and active living. PC co-sponsors the Weight of the State Conference which is a premier childhood obesity conference in Virginia. PC also leads efforts to convene partners to write the State Obesity Plan.

VFHY provides funding to Healthy Communities Action Teams (HCATs) throughout Virginia to improve access to healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity to prevent and reduce childhood obesity in the Commonwealth of Virginia. VFHY funding provides infrastructure support to build and sustain state and local capacity to implement promising practices and activities emphasizing policy, systems, and environmental change. VFHY Healthy Communities Action Teams consist of a minimum of five representatives from a locality. These partners may include community organizations, schools, policy makers, local growers, physicians, businesses, health departments, faith-based organizations, cooperative extension agencies, afterschool programs and others active in the call for healthier, sustainable lifestyles that prevent and reduce childhood obesity.

HCATs are charged with addressing two areas related to impact and sustainability. First, HCATs work to build community infrastructure to ensure they will have the foundation to select and implement the required changes in their localities. These activities can include board and strategic plan development as well as planning for becoming a nonprofit organization. Secondly, HCATs also identify opportunities in their communities to address obesity prevention through policy, systems and environmental changes. The community coalitions develop and address nutrition and/or physical activity initiatives. HCATs identify opportunities for policy, systems and environmental changes that promote increased access to healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity at the local level.

There are multiple opportunities for organization to promote physical activity in Northern Virginia. These include ensuring that all children have access to safe, neighborhood-based

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recreational areas and play spaces. Schools are providing additional opportunities for students to engage in physical activity, and educate students about the importance of maintaining a physically active lifestyle. Schools are encouraging participation in after school athletic teams or other community-based programs that promote physical activity. Together, local government officials, schools, and community leaders can work with parents and families to provide information about physical activity and affordable opportunities for children to participate in community-based programs.

To promote better nutrition in Northern Virginia, local organizations and partners can expand access to healthy foods for low-income and single-parent households. School district leaders can encourage local and state officials to increase funding for free and reduced-price meal programs, and weekend and summertime food distribution, so that all school-age children are fed daily. Schools and community partners can also establish daycare and preschool meal programs to provide meals for younger children. Schools can work with community partners to develop lunch menus that offer healthier foods, and replace traditional vending machine snacks with healthy alternatives. In addition, schools can teach nutrition education and the importance of healthy eating habits. Finally, schools and municipalities can establish outreach programs to educate parents and families about healthy eating habits and nutrition, and provide information about assistance programs and community organizations that promote childhood nutrition.

Review of Federal, State and Local Policies and Programs to Address Physical Activity and Nutrition Policy

On the federal level, when considering existing policy development related to combating childhood obesity, it is important to also take into account the ongoing initiatives related to this issue under the umbrellas of both economic policy and education policy. Presently, there is considerable dialogue at the federal and national levels around early childhood development. Access to healthy food is critical for healthy growth and development. Many federal programs focus on ensuring that children are being provided a healthy foundation with regard to food and forming healthy habits before they enter into the public school system. These programs include support for parents to make sure children have access to healthy foods before, during and after birth. For example, the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), helps low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women access to the nutrition and education they need to give their children a healthy start. The WIC Farmer's Market Nutrition Program increases participant's access to locally grown, unprocessed fruits and vegetables. Federal child nutrition programs such as the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), provides federal funding to serve nutritious meals to children in child care.

Outside of the federal government, there are a number of private sector and non-profit initiatives to connect young children to healthy, nutritious foods. For example, the areas of food education and healthy food access have begun to see increased funding and support from

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many large foundations. T Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation are all putting money towards support for early childhood development.

There is also movement within the state of Virginia to support early childhood development. Although the Virginia (VPI) does not specifically focus on early childhood nutrition it does create momentum and increased opportunity for parents, providers, businesses, and communities to partner to improve school readiness. Since health and nutrition impact school readiness, VPI could open the door for conversations about the connections between food access and early childhood development. Further, the First Lady of Virginia, Dorothy McAuliffe's platform is built around programs promoting healthy lifestyles. First Lady McAuliffe has demonstrated her support for increasing access to healthy foods and health food education through her help launching the statewide campaign known as "Eat Smart, Move More" that is part of Virginia Cooperative Extension's Family Nutrition Program, whose mission is to help low-income families make healthy food choices on a limited budget and to promote healthy, active lifestyles.

Locally, Fairfax and Arlington County have launched efforts to improve nutrition in early childhood. Over the past year, the Partnership for a Healthier Fairfax, through a Community Transformation Grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, convened stakeholders to develop a strategy for expanding participation in CACFP. In the fall of 2013, the Arlington County Healthy Community Action Team established a preschool subcommittee to advance nutrition and physical activity policies and programs in child care.

The recent significant expansions in policy supporting early childhood development, specifically nutrition and physical activity, at the federal and state level has opened up many unique local opportunities for the JLNV to work with existing partners to promote nutrition and physical activity education.

Opportunities at the Local Level for JLNV to Implement Policy and Programs with Existing Community Partners

Cornerstones

Description of Current Program: Cornerstones is a nonprofit organization based in Herndon and dedicated to promoting self-sufficiency by providing support and advocacy for those in need of food, shelter, affordable housing, quality childcare, and other human services. Cornerstones' Embury Rucker shelter has been a long-standing partner of the JLNV. In 2014, JLNV awarded the Laurel Learning Center, an initiative of Cornerstones, a grant for the purchased of gardening supplies and curriculum to develop the "Great Health for Kids". The center has a beautiful garden and wanted a preschool curriculum to enhance food growth in the garden, provide children the opportunity to learn about the way their food grows and provide them an opportunity to develop a relationship with their foods. The JLNV grant money allowed for the

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purchase of curriculum for the childcare center with the goal to focus on a foundation for healthy and active living.

In addition to the Laurel Learning Center's curriculum, the JLNV provided the center with volunteer hours. This volunteer piece, which is led by the Kids in the Kitchen Committee, began in June 2014 and consists of a monthly lesson for the parents focusing on the fruits, vegetables, and herbs growing in the garden to reinforce what the children were learning in the classroom. The monthly 'parent lessons' focus on reinforcing the concepts the children learn through their new curriculum in addition to providing parents with tips and resources for purchasing a healthy diet. Each parent class ends with an interactive cooking class in which participants learn recipes they can make at home with their own families. Although this program is officially scheduled to end in October 2014, the Laurel Learning Center has asked Kids in the Kitchen to consider offering classes every month for the remainder of the league year.

Opportunity for Expansion: Garden teaching is a recognized area of interest for our JLNV members, and is specifically related to our priority area of child nutrition education under early childhood development. That said the JLNV's project with the Laurel Learning Center presents the league with a potential to grow this specific program, as well as to continue exploring the JLNV's involvement in gardening education with other potential partners.

Head Start

Description of Current Program: Another example of a JLNV project working to address early childhood obesity and to increase healthy food education is the partnership we have established with Head Start. Head Start is a federal program that supports the mental, social, and emotional development of children from birth to age 5 in low-income families. Locally, JLNV has partnered with Fairfax County Early Head Start. Fairfax County Head Start is not a JLNV grantee. Nevertheless, starting in the fall of 2013, the Kids in the Kitchen Committee began partnering with the Fairfax County Head Start to provide parent education classes that focus on healthy eating, active living, shopping on a budget, and food resources within Fairfax County such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), farmer's markets, or food pantries.

Opportunity for Expansion: There is potential for the JLNV to grow our partnership with Head Start. In the summer of 2014, the Community Council met with the Fairfax County Head Start Public Health Nutritionist, who expressed a need for a program to help build gardens for early care providers and offer garden-based learning opportunities for providers, children, and parents. Kids in the Kitchen is currently researching the feasibility of such a project, including funding, potential partners, and curriculum. Recently, JLNV was approached by the Falls Church Head Start to possibly provide similar parent education classes and garden programming.

Kid's Can

Description of Current Program: The Kids Can program offers children at three different shelters in Northern Virginia the opportunity to interact with Junior League members and engage in enrichment

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and charter building activities. Monthly evening events include active games, a story with a positive message followed by a discussion, such as reading *Oh, the Places You'll Go* by Dr. Seuss and talking about goal setting, a healthy snack and some sort of craft project.

Opportunity for Expansion: The Kids Can committee is in the process of revising the curriculum to incorporate books that promote healthy eating and active living. The committee is also working to incorporate physical activity opportunities into a new enrichment series, which launched in the fall of 2014. As a part of this series, Kids Can is exploring the feasibility of incorporating swimming lessons for children at the shelters through partnership with Arlington Parks and Recreation and the Arlington-Alexandria Coalition for the Homeless (AACH). JLNV is also preparing to launch “family fitness nights” at the Embury Rucker Shelter including basketball, games, and other physical fitness activities.

Child and Family Network Centers (CFNC)

Description of Current Program: In 2014, the JLNV granted the Alexandria based, Child and Family Network Centers (CFNC), funding for classroom supplies to help educate preschoolers on the importance of healthy and active living to including take home health, wellness, and nutrition kits for students. The CFNC provides educational and support services to children and their families who live at, or below, the poverty line, and works to prepare children to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

Opportunity for Expansion: The JLNV has been in continued discussions with the CFNC to explore possibly hosting family fitness nights in the future and we have also provided them with JLNV volunteer hours.

Kids in the Kitchen (KITK), “Little Market Explorer’s Program”

Description of Current Program: This project came about through the JLNV’s involvement on the Loudoun County Pediatric Obesity Coalition’s sub-committee on food access and SNAP (formerly known as food stamps) at the market. To increase access to fresh local produce, the Loudoun Valley Homegrown Market Collaborative has applied to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) machine to process SNAP purchases. The machine will allow the market to participate in INOVA’s Double Dollar program, which provides SNAP recipients with \$10 in matching funds for the first \$10 in SNAP purchases at the market. The Leesburg market received their EBT machine earlier this spring and the incentive program launched on May 5, 2014. The Cascades market is awaiting their machine.

In order to increase their nutrition education, families may participate in the Little Market Explorers program, which is a partnership between the JLNV and the Loudoun County Obesity Coalition. The Little Market Explorers program is available to all children regardless of income in order to reduce stigma. However, with the help of service providers at neighboring FQHCs and social service centers, the program is marketed towards low-income families. The Little Market Explorers program is composed of eight stations, each with its own vendor. Each child receives a Little Market Explorers Passport card. In order to complete their passports, children are guided from station to station by volunteers who help them complete such station activities as

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answering a question about how many fruits and vegetables you should eat daily, planting seeds to learn about how food grows, or performing exercise sessions. The final station is the Kids in the Kitchen booth, where JLNV volunteers help children make a healthy snack and provide prizes for completing the program.

Opportunity for Expansion: INOVA's Double Dollar program is offered at many Farmer's Markets across Northern Virginia. INOVA is an active participant in the LPOC food access subcommittee and is interested in hosting the Little Market Explorers program at other markets throughout Northern Virginia. Additionally, the Arlington Healthy Community Action Team reached out to Kids in the Kitchen about the possibility of offering the program at markets in Arlington County.

HealthWorks

Description of Current Program: The KITK program at HealthWorks for Northern Virginia launched at the Leesburg site in the fall of 2013. HealthWorks is a trio of nonprofit, Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC) located in Leesburg, Sterling, and Herndon, Virginia (all in Loudoun county). HealthWorks was created to provide quality medical, dental, and behavioral health services to those who have limited or no health insurance. At least 63% of HealthWorks patients live at or below the federal poverty line. The KITK program, "Food, Fitness and Fun" is currently only offered at the Leesburg location and is ran in partnership with the Loudoun County Pediatric Obesity Coalition. "Food, Fitness and Fun" runs for 6-weeks in the spring and 6-weeks in the fall, for children and their families. Through HealthWorks, local pediatricians refer families with obese children to the "Food, Fitness and Fun" program inviting them to participate in physical activity led by certified fitness trainers from the Loudon County Pediatric Obesity Coalition, followed by group counseling focusing on unique weekly themes, such as healthy eating, building a healthy plate, the importance of breakfast, drinking water, healthy weight management, self esteem, etc. Each group is broken down into specific age groups. The JLNV's Kids in the Kitchen (KITK) volunteers work with both the elementary school aged children and the attending parents, while the Loudon County Obesity Prevention Coalition works with the teenage aged group, which includes counseling from behavioral health specialists. At the end of each session, the groups come back together and make a healthy snack as a family.

Opportunity for Expansion: TBD

Arcadia

Description of Current Program: Another project the JLNV is currently working on to address food access is our work with Arcadia, an organization dedicated to creating a more equitable and sustainable local food system in the Washington, DC area. The JLNV's partnership with Arcadia focuses on working in the garden and helping prepare for farm camp for low-income children to expose them to the farm. The JLNV also provided volunteer hours to support the farm camp in the summer.

Opportunity for Expansion: JLNV has the potential to grow our partnership with Arcadia to work with them on their mobile market program, which brings fresh produce into the low-income

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community, as well as partner with them on their work to provide nutrition education classes to local schools including cooking demonstrations.

Coalition Partnerships

The JLNV has been partnering primarily with four different coalitions to include, the Loudon County Obesity Prevention Coalition, the Northern Virginia Healthy Kids Coalition (NVHKC), the Arlington Healthy Community Action Team (HCAT) Coalition, and the Partnership for Healthier Fairfax. All four of these coalition partnerships present different opportunities for the JLNV to engage in the conversation to not just create programs but also to discuss and explore opportunities for policy options of actual things the JLNV can do to increase healthy living. For example, on the Arlington Health Community Action Team (HCAT) committee members actually proposed changes to the childcare code, to put in recommendations into the code so that childcare providers would receive training and resources that they can share with families. Currently the Partnership for Healthier Fairfax has been working to increase bike access with bike plans. These coalitions also present other policy options the JLNV can potentially explore such as a food policy council.

Children's Science Center (CSC)

The JLNV has long fostered a successful partnership with the Children's Science Center (CSC). As the JLNV moves forward with developing future initiatives supporting our focus area of fighting childhood obesity, there are new opportunities with the CSC to explore the science of the body, for example heart health and how food impacts the body, etc.

Girls on the Run (GOTR)

Description of Current Program: This includes current work we have been doing with Girls on the Run (GOTR). In addition, there is a lot of movement right now with active living on the national, state, and local/community levels. How can we change the built-in environment in order to improve communities, to include master bike plans, plans around increasing walkability, sidewalks, safety and building playgrounds in low income communities.

Opportunity for Expansion: JLNV could provide training to coaches in areas such as proper stretching, good running technique, etc.

Policy Recommendations

Through our research, the JLNV has developed a comprehensive plan to improve the health and wellness of the Northern Virginia community. The plan outlines policy initiatives organized under the categories of physical activity and nutrition. These initiatives will allow the JLNV to more effectively focus League activities to achieve a healthier community. Overall the JLNV has many opportunities available to grow and develop around the focus area of childhood obesity. We truly cannot fight obesity without addressing both healthy living and physical activity specifically framed through the approach of working to build healthy communities. Presently we have great partners and forward movement within the Northern Virginia community supporting both increased access to healthy foods, healthy food education

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and increased active living and physical activity for children. However, there is room for us to grow and expand our advocacy work in this arena in the Northern Virginia community by following the following recommendations:

- Though the JLNV does not have any strong partnerships with specific federal partners at this time, this is an area that has potential for the JLNV moving forward. On the state and local levels there are many examples of JLNV initiatives that align with programs and partnerships to support increasing access to healthy foods and health food education. In exploring these opportunities the JLNV must be as strategic as possible throughout the state, which can be accomplished through engaging in not only healthy living but also active living.
- JLNV will aim to support policies addressing childhood nutrition and increased physical activity for children with the goal of increasing access to healthy foods and improving children's health food education.
- In supporting our partners' agendas, the JLNV should learn more about their agendas to identify other areas we can support and leverage our policy agenda with these partners.
- JLNV has a lack of partners to support the promotion of physical activity education. We may want to consider who could be potential allies in the physical activity space and identify potential partners to support that work. Advocacy strategies that have the most synergy currently revolve around promoting active places such as park spaces, playgrounds, walking paths, and bike lanes. With the potential adoption of a bike master plan for Fairfax County by the Board of Supervisors, the JLNV may want to understand how strategies in the master plan will be implemented and identify areas for potential advocacy and support.
- As JLNV advocates for these programs and policies, in the communities, the JLNV should consider adopting healthy eating guidelines for events and functions as a suggestion for organizers.
- JLNV should provide programming and training to educate members on healthy eating active living to better understand the policies we are advocating for in the community.
- JLNV should identify ways to educate the public as well on these activities through programming and social media to promote activities such as safe routes to school, farm to school initiatives, etc.
- The JLNV Community Council and Community Partnerships Committee should actively seek out partners with expertise in physical activity and nutrition.
- CAB should consider adding a member with experience in policies to promote physical activity.

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- JLNV should find a signature project to support.
- JLNV should consider attending the Weight of the State Conference to network, present on our programs, and to raise our visibility.
- To advocate for nutrition, the JLNV will back community programs that increase access to affordable and healthy foods for all in the community.
- JLNV supports initiatives that increase healthy food options to children at schools, sporting venues, food banks, farmers' markets, and other locations.
- JLNV supports increasing community gardens and educational programs that educate children and families on farm-to-table practices and healthy eating.

By advocating on behalf of these policy options, JLNV seeks to advance the health and wellbeing of all children living in Northern Virginia, and guarantee for them equitable opportunities for physical activity and access to healthy foods.

Citation

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