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# Advancing Healthy Food Policies, Systems and Environments for Youth in Northwest Minnesota

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*The purpose of the Northwest Minnesota health policy summit and accompanying brief is to:*

- 1) Present information regarding the severity of childhood obesity in Northwest Minnesota;*
- 2) Increase regional awareness of current activities designed to address obesity as it relates to healthy eating/nutrition; and*
- 3) Provide a venue for organizations and individuals to jointly discuss issues, collectively build partnerships, and creatively identify and review solutions.*



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## The Obesity Threat: Extent of the Problem

If you combined the entire city populations of Mahanomen (1,202), Fosston (1,470) and Hallock (1,196), it would be equivalent to the approximate number of youth residing in Northwest Minnesota<sup>1</sup> who are overweight<sup>2</sup> or at risk for being overweight<sup>3</sup>. These children have the highest risk for developing juvenile diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and premature death.<sup>4,5</sup>

While emphasizing an increase in children's physical activity has been a common call to action in combating the obesity epidemic, it is only half of the solution. Recent federal grants that have been awarded regionally highlight physical activity enhancement efforts (e.g. Carol White Physical Activity grant, 21st Century grants). Historically, less emphasis has been placed on increasing youth's consumption of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains; but current state and national efforts are shifting to include a greater focus on nutrition. One example of this change is the recently awarded 1.1 million dollar Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) grant funded through the Minnesota Department of Health to local public health departments in Northwest Minnesota<sup>1</sup>. The goal of SHIP is to work closely with local communities, schools, and employers on implementing small but meaningful changes to make healthier options a greater part of everyday life. Ultimately, the goal of this Minnesota legislative grant initiative is to decrease preventable chronic conditions that lead to increased healthcare costs for all Minnesotans.

SHIP grant priorities clearly address an important regional need given the rates of overweight/obese children. Further data supporting this need obtained from the Minnesota Student Survey (2008) reveals that only 12.0% of 12th grade students report adequate daily intake of fruits and vegetables. This

finding is significantly (statistically) lower than the overall state rate of 16.1% (Poltavski & Kruger, 2010) (nationally for grades 9-12 it is 22.3%; Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2010). It is also far lower than the 21.3% of adult Minnesotans who reported consuming five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day (BRFSS, 2007). Thus, while increasing physical activity is important, clearly room exists for making advances in healthy eating.

## Regional Barriers Influencing Healthy Eating Behaviors in Youth

### Background Information

#### *Identification of Barriers*

A wide ranging series of over 80 key informant interviews with school superintendents, school food service staff, community leaders, regional healthcare providers, and others have occurred as part of ongoing SHIP grant needs assessment, quality improvement, and evaluation efforts. Participants were asked questions such as, "To what extent is unhealthy eating and physical inactivity a problem in your community?" and "What are top nutrition barriers you believe should be addressed to improve the health of all youth in the region?" Responses to these questions and others were collectively analyzed. A compilation of responses relevant to the topic at hand revealed three broad areas of concern: 1) Food Distribution, 2) Food Preparation and 3) School Environment (see Figure 1). Further information in each of these three areas will be provided in the remaining sections of this brief followed by potential solutions.

### School Environment Barriers

#### *Purchasing/Costs*

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) per-lunch federal cash reimbursement rates for school year (SY) 2009-10 for free, reduced-price, and full-price lunches are \$2.68, \$2.28, and 25 cents,

<sup>1</sup> The eight counties served through Statewide Health Improvement Program Grant activities are Kittson, Mahanomen, Marshall, Norman, Pennington, Polk, Red Lake, and Roseau.

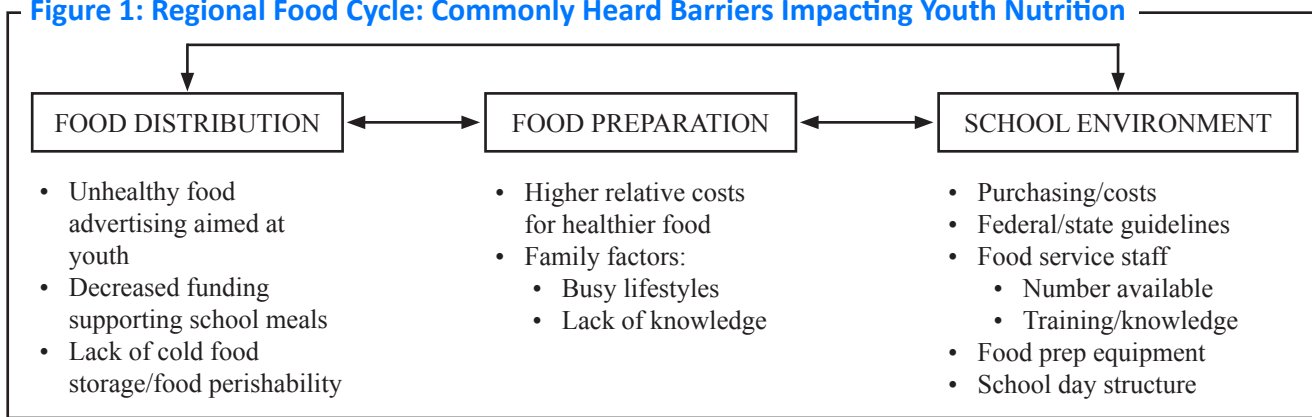
<sup>2</sup> Equal to or greater than the 95th percentile on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) growth charts.

<sup>3</sup> 85th to less than 95th percentile on the CDC growth charts.

<sup>4</sup> There were approximately 15,638 students enrolled in K-12 within the eight county region during fall 2010. (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Regional estimates of overweight and at-risk counts are calculated using 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data on weight for 12th graders from Northwest Minnesota and extrapolated to include all age groups. Currently, only 9-12th grades collect body mass index (BMI) data for the (YRBS). Nationally, 12.0% of all students are obese and 15.8% overweight.

**Figure 1: Regional Food Cycle: Commonly Heard Barriers Impacting Youth Nutrition**



respectively (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2009). Approximately only \$1.00 to \$1.25 of that money goes to the actual food itself as the rest goes to pay for overhead expenses such as labor costs, supplies, contract services, indirect costs (United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2008).

While there is a commodity benefit in the federal school lunch program, it provides only an additional 19.5 cents per meal served, regardless of student payment (based on food ordering data from all Minnesota schools in SY 2008-09; Peterson, 2009). Peterson (2009) estimated that for every \$1 spent on USDA commodity products, schools pay on average an additional 12 to 27 cents to transport and store those products, compared to .02 to .03 cents for commercial equivalents.

Adding to school food budget challenges are the highly variable price fluctuations within a school's

*“If you asked the average person to... prepare a meal for hundreds of hungry kids with just \$2.68 a child with only \$1.00 of that money going to the food itself, they would look at you like you were crazy...that's less than what many folks spend on a cup of coffee.”*

*– Michelle Obama, First Lady  
The White House, 2010*

food purchasing for fruits, vegetables and meats. Prices for these goods cannot be locked in for more than three months at a time unlike other items.

**Federal/State Guidelines**

The Richard B. Russel National School Lunch Act requires meals served in school lunch and breakfast programs to reflect the most recent *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, however fewer than 20% of schools nationally serve lunches that follow the 2005 guidelines (Best, 2009). More recently the Institute of Medicine has put forth more stringent standards for menu planning requested by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that 1) increase the amount and variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains; 2) set a minimum and maximum level of calories; and 3) increase the focus on reducing the amounts of saturated fat and sodium provided (Institute of Medicine, 2009). These new guidelines, if adopted, will likely impact the way schools prepare meals.

Currently, nutrient standard menu planning (NSMP) is offered to school food service directors (FSD) in Minnesota compared to traditional and enhanced food based menu planning. Under NSMP, school menus are evaluated using a nutrient analysis of foods offered (United States Department of Agriculture, 2010). However, if schools choose the NSMP option, the meal plans must gain additional approval and its' creation generates additional administrative work for the school FSD. Due to the dis-incentives, FSD's are less likely to participate.

Furthermore, few nutrition resources/efforts/grants are targeted at schools that possess less than a 50% rate of free/reduced meals served. In other words,

**What is the Food Distribution System?**

*The food distribution system is a mechanism through which food products move from farms and ranches to consumers; this system constitutes a number of components, including: post-harvest facilities, shippers, brokers, and wholesalers (American Farmland Trust, 2010).*

*In order for any foods to reach a wide audience, a distribution system must be in place. Figure 1 illustrates that the flow of information in the food system moves in a cycle. Individuals, organizations, and buying groups drive demand for products in the food distribution system which in turn ships these foods to end users for consumption. Demand for food items within the food distribution system includes consumer taste preferences, ease/speed of food preparation time, purchasing costs, food preparation knowledge by end users, food storage capacity, shelf life of foods purchased, and federal/state regulations.*

these schools, while less economically challenged, do not get the benefit of nutrition programs currently being offered.

***Food Service Staff (number available for prep, training, knowledge)***

Regionally there are wide ranges of staffing capabilities among schools. Smaller schools tend to have a head cook with minimal assistance, whereas larger schools may have a FSD, a Head Cook, and 3-5 staff per building. Logistically, any policies or regulations that place much additional food preparation requirements on already short-handed staff could prove overwhelming, especially for smaller school districts. Furthermore, many staff expressed a desire to acquire more knowledge and attend trainings, however scheduling demands, traveling distance, and few trainings regionally make training attendance challenging.

***Food Preparation Equipment***

As the preparation of school meals has been outsourced to external meal providers, some school FSD’s and head cooks within the region have reported to SHIP staff that they neither have appropriate pans, food choppers nor other processing equipment to produce meals other than heat-and-serve. If districts were going to utilize more raw fruits and vegetables, they would need to have increased cooking and processing capacities. In short, there is great variability in the way food is prepared across school districts.

***School Day Structure***

Many school personnel and parents regionally have indicated a belief that structural barriers to

youth nutrition exist throughout the school day, and include: 1) too little time allotted for children to eat school meals, 2) overall decreases in youth activity levels are due in part to decreases in physical education classes and recess time, 3) fewer classroom nutrition education experiences, and 4) school /classroom celebrations focused around unhealthy foods.

**Food Preparation Barriers**

***Higher Relative Costs for Healthier Foods***

Calorie for calorie, junk foods cost less than fruits and vegetables (Mosivais & Drewnowski, 2007). According to Parker-Pope (2007), a typical American will spend \$7 daily for food, however lower socioeconomic status (SES) individuals spend only \$4. Given the need for inexpensive sustenance, lower SES individuals typically gravitate toward foods yielding the most calories per dollar (Parker-Pope, 2007).

***Family Factors: Busy Lifestyles/Lack of Knowledge***

In many cases, interviewees expressed the perception that parents have little knowledge of

*“I feel bad when people come into the store and say, “I need my fruit for the day” when buying Starburst candy.”*

*– Local Convenience Store Clerk*

how to prepare raw foods, much less in a nutritious way or that maximizes nutrient value. Numerous parents, school and healthcare administrators, and community members reported in their dialogues with SHIP staff that many parents have such busy lifestyles they often forget the importance of nutrition in both their own lives and that of their children.

### Food Distribution System Barriers

#### *Unhealthy Food Advertising Aimed at Youth*

It is no secret that children face a daily barrage of unhealthy food marketing messages. Results of youth marketing strategies studied by Yale's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity (2010) found:

- The average preschooler sees almost three ads per day for fast food; children ages 6-11 see three-and-a-half ads; and teens ages 12-17 see almost five ads per day.
- 40% of children ages 2-11 ask their parents to go to McDonald's at least once a week, and 15% of preschoolers ask to go every day.
- 84% of parents reported taking their child ages 2-11 to a fast food restaurant at least once in the past week.

#### *Decreased Funding Supporting School Meals*

From 2001-08 there was a 31.78% increase in the average costs of lunches across Minnesota while at the same time, the NSLP Federal reimbursement rate rose only 22.28% (Jensen, 2009). Adding to the challenges schools face are budget cuts due to state revenue shortfalls, declining enrollments, and increased school operating costs. The state of Minnesota is facing an approximate \$6.2 billion dollar revenue short-fall starting July 1, 2011 for state FY 2011-12. Currently, funding for K-12 education accounts for 37% of state spending (Startribune.com, 2010; Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, 2010).

#### *Lack of Cold Food Storage /Food Perishability*

A lack of adequate cold food storage space is a primary hurdle in increasing the use of fresh fruits/vegetables in schools according to many FSD's and Head Cooks within the region. Any efforts made to

enhance cold storage space regionally must do so either through 1) developing a centralized regional fresh fruits/vegetables storage and distribution network, 2) increasing school storage capacity, or 3) increasing collaboration across organizations to share storage space (such as local hospitals or restaurants). Overall, the use of fresh foods is at a distinct disadvantage compared to canned goods due to disparities in shelf life.

“*There's a whole generation of parents out there who were never taught the ease of cooking.*”

– *Jamie Oliver, TV Show Host  
Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*

### Improving Healthy Eating Options for Youth: Regional Strategies

#### School Environment Strategies

Costs and cost containment are the primary concern for schools. Examining ways to control food costs and also provide cutting-edge curriculum on healthy nutrition could include incorporating the following:

- ✓ Implement the *Great Trays*<sup>6</sup> program within schools regionally.
  - The Minnesota Department of Health was awarded a two-year \$2.3 million grant from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to implement the *Great Trays* program. *Great Trays* will identify cost savings on healthier foods and provide tools and trainings to plan kid-tested menus that meet new nutrition recommendations.
  - Participants in the program will analyze their current menus, develop marketing ideas, examine methods to build support for healthy eating among students, parents and staff, and work to re-energize their food program with new ideas, tools and resources.
  - Explore potential participation in the Minnesota School Food Buying Group.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.health.state.mn.us/schools/greattrays/>

- ✓ Implement the *Go Wild with Fruits and Veggies!*<sup>7</sup> within schools regionally.
  - The SHIP grant (in the eight county region in Northwest Minnesota) will provide financial resources to cover the \$200 cost for any school district interested in implementing the curriculum that has not already done so.
  - *Go Wild with Fruits & Veggies!* is a comprehensive classroom curriculum provided through the University of Minnesota Extension Nutrition Education Program that encourages students in grades 3-5 to eat more fruits and vegetables and become more physically active. Currently, this curriculum is offered to schools serving at least 50% free and reduced cost lunches.
- ✓ Identify local volunteers to assist school staff in completing additional food preparation duties associated with fresh food.
  - Some schools within the region have had volunteers come in to cut and chop or help with the students under a licensed staff.
    - Involve the use of students in food preparation.
      - Utilize various student teams/clubs, or classes.
    - Involve senior centers or civic organizations.
    - Involve parent groups.

While picky eaters can be problematic, children may need up to 10-12 exposures to warm up to a new food. Solutions include:

- ✓ Coordinate efforts with influential leaders who work with youth on a daily basis such as 4-H, church, youth groups, coaches and others to implement healthy food policies and/or practices.
  - Host dietitian presentations/conversations with youth sports teams about proper nutrition followed up by coaches disallowing unhealthy energy drinks and promoting players' consumption of healthy foods such as bringing fresh fruit to each game.
  - Currently, approximately 20 grants are available for awards of up to \$500 to any organization to get children involved in outdoor activities, including school/ community gardening. Deadline to apply for the second round is February 1, 2011. To apply, go to <http://www1.crk.umn.edu/events/childrenandnature/grant/>.
  - Minnesota's Community Education program promotes lifelong learning and community involvement through a range of activities. It is managed independently by each school district and generates revenue from user fees, grants, and state and local taxes.
    - Schools can provide visibility and promotion for community education opportunities to a broad audience of students, parents and community members.
    - One such example of adult community nutrition education is the 'Cooking Matters' program through the University of Minnesota Extension service.
      - It is a hands-on, cooking based nutrition education program that teaches families how to prepare healthy and tasty meals on a limited budget using foods that are commonly available in stores.
      - Each course is taught by a local volunteer chef and a Nutrition Education Assistant from the University of Minnesota Extension (University of Minnesota Extension, 2010).

### Food Preparation Strategies

Because children learn by example, parents and other role models must first make sure they are eating healthy foods themselves. Parents also need to be persistent in offering their children new foods.

“[We need to] *“Educate parents and help them to understand the basics of family cooking and responsible nutrition.*”

– *Oliver, 2006*

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.extension.umn.edu/nutrition/>

- Other groups such as nutrition and healthcare professionals, concerned community citizens, local restaurants and local grocery stores could provide classes or support in terms of products and/or space to host classes.
- Enlist local health insurance providers (Blue Cross Blue Shield, State Farm, UCare, Medica, and others) to provide financial support for nutrition programs and training within local communities.
- ✓ Provide school districts with access to a dietician, free of charge through the SHIP grant.
  - Currently, SHIP dieticians have worked with six schools in the region to provide meal modification suggestions that are cost-neutral or cost-saving and will assist them in meeting more stringent changes in state nutrition regulation guidelines.
- ✓ Food service staff that operate Farm to School programs need training to improve their culinary skills. After decades of “heat and serve” cooking dominating school menus, food service staff may need training in an array of areas (Community Alliance with Family Farmers, 2010).
  - The Great Trays grant, Public Health and others have begun to produce resources and work with school food service staff who need produce handling information and recipe ideas.
- ✓ Continue education classes for parents, youth and families.
  - Currently community early childhood nutrition opportunities classes exist through the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) classes, and Head Start.
  - Explore options for expanding community family education classes beyond early childhood.
- ✓ Increased conversations between healthcare providers and patients about what constitutes healthy eating, why it’s important, and how to make small changes, etc.

## Food Distribution System Strategies

The first steps forward in the effort to bring fresh foods to youth and reconnect children with agriculture can include:

- ✓ Develop community and/or school gardens as a way to involve people in the production of their own food and generate interest in healthy eating.
  - Engage master gardener groups from within the community to work with students to produce food.
  - Pair youth with individuals from long term or assisted care facilities or who still want to garden but are of limited mobility.
- ✓ Enhance local and regional advertisements for garden surplus collection at local food shelves.
- ✓ Implement aspects of farm to school programs that emphasize nutrition education and connect community, cafeteria, and curriculum.
  - Explore gradations of farm to school implementation from least to greatest extent, for example:
    - Least extensive: prepare one special monthly meal with products raised by a local farmer and highlight those foods.
    - More extensive: utilize unprocessed, locally-grown substitutes such as raw potatoes versus boxed.
    - Most extensive: replace all frozen fruits/vegetables with fresh.<sup>8</sup>
- ✓ Elevate the priority of searches for and applications to nutrition grants by local Public Health as well as regional groups such as Northwest Minnesota Council of Collaboratives.
  - Post nutrition grants and cold food storage sales/opportunities on the Northwest Minnesota Council of Collaboratives website.
  - Fresh fruit/vegetable grants through the Minnesota Department of Education have been obtained by many schools regionally.
    - These grants work to create and expand the variety of fruits and vegetables offered and increase their consumption. In the past, eligible applicants included elementary schools that had 50% or more of its students eligible for free or reduced price meals.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.mn-farmtoschool.umn.edu/>

- ✓ Continue to foster relationships between entities with similar efforts addressing youth nutrition (such as the University of Minnesota Extension Service, Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, etc.).
  - Initiate regional conversations between stakeholder groups to develop food policy councils.
    - A food policy councils' role is to identify needs, build and develop relationships and assist communities in improving their food environments.
  - Identify ways that local purchasing groups can band together in larger multi-county collaboratives to obtain bigger volume discounts. Partners with distribution systems could include hospitals, schools, long term care facilities, grocery stores, convenience stores, county government, childcare providers and others.
    - Access to locally grown food providers can be found online at <http://www.localfoods.umn.edu/>.
- ✓ Continue to promote healthy eating/lifestyles through local public health billboards, radio clips, newspaper articles and other promotional tools.

### Legislative Policy Options that Increase Access to Nutritious Foods

- ✓ Recently, a \$4.5 billion bill was approved by the U.S. House of Representatives and signed by president Obama. It was designed to, 1) increase the amount of money schools are reimbursed for free lunches by 6 cents a meal, 2) adopt the USDA guidelines, and 3) cut down on greasy foods and extra calories (Huffingtonpost.com, 2010).
- ✓ School districts in Northwest Minnesota need an infusion of capital to restore food preparation and processing capacity.
  - For Farm to School purchasing to work best, districts need funds for food preparation, storage, and labor to process fresh produce.
  - Grant opportunities can be found at: <http://www.mn-farmtoschool.umn.edu/>

- ✓ The state of Minnesota should explore offering reduced hurdles to nutrient standard meal planning participation.
  - Nutrient standard meal planning is a mechanism that is already available and in place for making improvements but at the same time appears to be impractical to implement.
  - Explore the possibility of implementing the concept gradually, such as a few meals or days at a time.
- ✓ Identify ways to recover the higher costs of buying locally grown fresh produce.
  - The Colorado House of Representatives passed the Farm to School Healthy Kids Act, which creates a task force to help farmers connect with school districts and to help school districts figure out how to recover some of the costs of buying locally grown fresh produce instead of cheap processed foods (Sixty-seventh General Assembly: State of Colorado, 2010).
- ✓ Continue to fund SHIP through legislative initiative support by local city, county, and state leadership.

### Conclusion

This generation of children is the first one that will not live as long as their parents. Many of the factors contributing to the obesity epidemic have been outlined in this report and are seemingly outside of the sphere of control. However, the reality of the situation is that incremental steps can lead to big changes. If it is the will of the people within the region to take on the responsibility for change and alter the future, then this report and the community conversation held January 12, 2010, can serve as purposeful tools in the direction of those efforts.

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## Public Health Staff

### Kittson Memorial Public Health (Kittson County)

Cindy Urbaniak, Director  
 Chelsea Boen, PHN  
 218-843-3662

### North Valley Public Health (Marshall County)

Gail Larson, Director  
 Francis Tougas, PHN  
 218-745-5154

### Norman-Mahnomen Public Health

Jamie Hennen, PH Director/CHS Administrator  
 Tammy Carlsrud, SHIP Coordinator  
 Thomas Melin  
 218-784-5425

### Inter-County Public Health (Pennington-Red Lake Counties)

Anita Cardinal, Director  
 Connie Hagen, PHN  
 218-681-0876

### Polk County Public Health

Sheri Altepeter, PH Director/CHS Administrator  
 Sarah Reese, SHIP Coordinator  
 Kirsten Fagerlund  
 Tammy Conn  
 218-281-3385

### Quin Community Health Services

Rachel Green, CHS Administrator  
 Mary Huglen, SHIP Coordinator  
 218-874-7845

### LifeCare Public Health (Roseau County)

Julie Pahlen, Director  
 Paula Hedlund, PHN  
 218-463-3211

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