

# IMPROVING EARLY CARE OBESITY PREVENTION THROUGH THE CHILD AND ADULT CARE FOOD PROGRAM

## Introduction

Childhood overweight and obesity affects one-third of U.S. children and adolescents. Alarming, more than a quarter of children between the ages of two and five are already overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> Young children starting out life with an unhealthy body weight face a high risk for chronic disease, decreased academic performance and poor self-image later in life.<sup>2</sup> Nemours seeks to address this critical public health issue by promoting policies and practices to improve health and well-being of children nationwide.

One promising strategy is to encourage child health promotion, including healthy eating and physical activity, in early care and education settings. Preschool children in full-day care were reported by the U.S. Census Bureau to spend about 33 hours per week in child care<sup>3</sup> and consume up to 50 percent of their daily energy requirements in this setting. With more than 11 million children under age five in the care of someone other than a parent,<sup>4</sup> child care facilities must ensure children have access to healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity.

Nemours recognizes the importance of starting early in life to promote healthy lifestyles and is focused on policy and practice changes in the child care sector as part of a multi-sector initiative (including primary care, schools and the community) to promote health and reduce or prevent childhood obesity in Delaware. Nemours also provides leadership in the central Florida community around childhood obesity and health issues particularly in the child care setting through the Florida Prevention Initiative. Based on that experience, Nemours has expanded its scope to promote healthy eating and physical activity in child care settings nationally. As part of that effort, Nemours identified and profiled 15 Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) providers and sponsors across the country to showcase different strategies being implemented to improve the nutrition quality of meals and snacks served through the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

## Child and Adult Care Food Program

The national program for child care feeding is the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). More than 3.3 million children receive nutritious meals and snacks each day as part of the day care they receive through CACFP.<sup>5</sup> Child care centers, family day care homes, afterschool programs and emergency shelters receive a federal reimbursement for the meals and snacks they serve, if specific nutrition standards are met. While evidence suggests children participating in CACFP receive more nutritious meals and snacks than those not participating,<sup>6</sup> current nutrition benchmarks were derived from recommendations in the 1995 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, 1989 Recommended Dietary Allowances and the Diet and Health report.<sup>7</sup>



## Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 required USDA to revise the meal requirements for CACFP to improve alignment with the most current *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Updated nutrition standards will improve consistency among other USDA nutrition programs and help address the high prevalence of obesity and other health concerns in our country's youngest children. In advance of updated nutrition requirements, many child care programs and CACFP providers have already seized the opportunity to provide more nutritious food options and have implemented initiatives that encourage healthy eating.

## Successful Strategies

This brief profiles child care programs across the country to showcase different strategies being implemented to improve the nutrition quality of meals and snacks served through CACFP. The case studies range from small to large programs in rural, suburban and urban settings, in all regions of the country. The following case studies highlight a number of lessons learned and promising practices to support improvements and innovation to help ensure children receive healthy meals and snacks through CACFP.



## Summary of Lessons Learned

### For most CACFP programs, some catalyst or motivator was necessary to spark change.

In nearly every instance, providers recalled a moment when they decided to implement changes to improve nutrition and wellness in their programs. Motivators differed, however, a few appeared frequently:

- **Attending training or workshop.** Several providers cited state agency- or sponsor-led training sessions as the turning point to enhance nutrition in their meal programs. This was especially the case if the training taught healthy cooking techniques and practical strategies to implement healthy meals. Overall, the providers interviewed agreed that meals containing less processed foods and more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean meats were best for children. The workshops gave them the skills to put this belief into practice.
- **Planting a garden.** A majority of the facilities profiled implemented gardens in their programs. Providers cited gardens as a way to spark interest in healthy eating and increase children's fruit and vegetable consumption. For many, enthusiasm over the garden among children, parents and staff was the jumping-off-point to menu modifications.

- **Parental or community involvement.** A few facilities cited feedback from a parent, community member or organization as the reason they began to transform nutrition and wellness in their program. Prior to this input, many were unaware of the impact of nutrition on health and well-being for the children in their care. For these facilities, sensible changes were presented in a way that appeared attainable to providers.
- **Financial incentives through grants.** The Child Care Wellness Grants, announced in 2010, and other grant programs, offered an additional motivator to revamp meal programs. Even very small amounts of money, when coupled with structured requirements and support, were a huge motivator to many providers interviewed. Many times grant programs included a self-assessment requirement, which offered an eye-opening opportunity for providers and helped to identify strategies to enhance nutrition in their programs. The minimal amounts of funding cited were generally not sufficient to support meal enhancements, however, interest in attaining the grant was the first step to overall improvements.

### Most programs cited “doing the right thing for kids” as the reasoning behind change.

Nearly all programs interviewed cited childhood obesity and other child health concerns as top factors in their decision to implement changes to their meal program. Those who made the decision to serve healthier meals and implement wellness practices for this reason were overwhelmingly pleased with the results, including the response of children and parents.



**Support from the State CACFP and sponsoring organizations was critical to success.**

CACFP state agencies and sponsoring organizations are in a unique position to lead, share with and train providers in the implementation of meal programs that exceed current nutrition requirements. Many providers would like to make changes, but do not have the expertise to do so or to know how to begin. A number of promising strategies were identified to assist providers:

- ***Mentoring programs at the state and sponsor level allow seasoned providers to share best practices and utilize resources with more inexperienced providers.***
- ***Opportunities for experiential learning, including workshops and culinary classes, helped to motivate providers and give them the skills necessary to create healthier meals.***
  - » Other methods of training were beneficial as well. While most providers preferred in-person, applied trainings, expense, staffing, and access were cited as barriers. Using technology to provide training in the form of webinars, interactive computer modules, videos, and visual teaching tools offers opportunities to reach providers with minimal cost and travel.
  - » A range of topics, from basic nutrition information and menu planning to more specific strategies to implement the most current *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, should be considered due to the range of knowledge of providers.
- ***Actionable steps and practical goals help to ensure providers are able to attain and maintain changes.*** Grant programs, recognition programs, guidance documents with clear step-by-step instructions and having the ability to tailor changes to individual programs provide the greatest opportunity for compliance and implementation.
  - » Practical resources such as recipes, sample menus and menu-planning guides also improve opportunities for success.
- ***Regular self-assessments of nutrition and wellness practices help providers assess progress and identify areas where support is needed.*** Providers need training and technical assistance, model policies and other resources to facilitate efforts to use self-assessment findings in the development of facility wellness policies.

**Food and nutrition professionals in the community, including chefs and dietitians, provide additional expertise and assistance in implementation.**

For many of the providers interviewed, a chef, dietitian or other nutrition professional acted in an advisory role to facilitate healthy changes. Some providers brought chefs and dietitians on staff in full-time, part-time, and consulting roles. More providers used these professionals in a training capacity to conduct workshops and in-services. In each case that cited the use of nutrition professionals, the provider was pleased with the outcome.



**While cost was cited as a concern, providers were able to implement strategies to manage costs and in some cases, after full implementation, costs were no greater than prior to nutrition enhancements.**

Increased cost is often seen as a barrier to nutrition improvements, and healthy food is often perceived to cost more than unhealthy food. For those programs that did have increased costs, providers cited their commitment to serve healthier meals as the reason to allocate additional program funds. A number of strategies to manage costs were also identified:

- ***Replace highly processed items with more made-from-scratch recipes.*** A number of providers were able to save food cost dollars by eliminating processed items such as chicken nuggets, fish sticks, and canned fruits and vegetables and replacing these with homemade items such as casseroles or fresh produce cleaned and chopped by staff. The change typically meant increased labor hours, however many providers said the savings in food cost outweighed the increased labor requirements. Providers also indicated the quality of meals improves when more meal components are prepared on-site.

- **Implement a cycle menu.** A cycle menu is a series of menus planned for a particular period of time, such as four weeks. Use of a cycle menu allows providers to forecast consumption quantities and plan for purchasing and staff scheduling. Providers found cost savings from quantity purchasing because menu items rotate and the same items are purchased in each cycle. Cycle menus also offer the opportunity to balance high-cost menu items with lower ones.
- **Purchase in bulk quantity** whenever possible to save money per unit or per pound.
- **Negotiate pricing with distributors and local retailers.** Even small facilities cited the need to discuss pricing with sales representatives and area store managers. If there is competition between local grocery stores or wholesale distributors, they may be willing to offer a lower price to keep the business.
- **Buy produce in season.** Flexibility in produce options allows providers to take advantage of sales and competitive pricing.
- **Consider farmers markets, local farms, co-ops, and local businesses** as opportunities to source high-quality items at prices below retail.
- **Consider offering vegetarian options.** Many providers discussed offering at least one meatless meal per week as a healthful way to reduce meal costs. Vegetarian dishes, such as beans and rice, vegetable and cheese frittatas, bean soups, egg salad, and bean burritos can provide high-quality, budget-friendly meat alternates.

### Buy-in from faculty, staff, parents and the community helps create sustainable change.

Many providers cited the need for buy-in at all levels to be successful. Providers should bring in faculty and staff to be a part of the planning process and encourage input on barriers, opportunities and implementation strategies. Providers can engage staff and parents through regular communication on nutrition and wellness initiatives, monthly menus, and nutrition education. Nutrition workshops and cooking classes offer additional opportunities to engage stakeholders. Providers can also reach out to local colleges, extension offices, local businesses and volunteer organizations for help and support on wellness initiatives and funding.

### Nutrition education for students and stakeholders can help to smooth transitions to the new ways of doing things.

Many providers used education to help stakeholders understand the reasoning behind changes and strongly believed that a deeper knowledge of nutrition and health helped to prevent backsliding.

### Gradual implementation contributes to success.

Many providers found that gradual implementation of changes facilitated acceptance. This allowed time for taste testing by staff and children, incorporation of new foods into menus with familiar foods, and incorporation of new or unfamiliar foods into activities to increase children's exposure. A gradual approach also helped overcome adult perceptions of how new meals would be accepted by children – often identified as one of the greatest barriers to menu changes.

## Conclusion

Early care and education providers have the opportunity to teach children habits necessary to prevent childhood obesity and keep them healthy for life. The CACFP programs profiled decided to use this opportunity to improve health and nutrition for the children under their care. They demonstrate that positive nutrition changes are not only possible, but also sustainable. Implementation of any number of the wide variety of strategies identified by these providers has the potential to help improve the health of all children in early care and education.





## About Nemours

Nemours is an internationally recognized children’s health system that owns and operates the Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Delaware, and Nemours Children’s Hospital in Orlando, Florida, along with major pediatric specialty clinics in Delaware, Florida, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The Nemours promise is to do whatever it takes to treat every child as we would our own. We are committed to making family-centered care the cornerstone of our health system.

Established as The Nemours Foundation through the legacy and philanthropy of Alfred I. duPont, Nemours offers pediatric clinical care, research, education, advocacy and prevention programs to families in the communities we serve. We leverage our entire system to improve the health of our communities by creating unique models, creating new points of access and delivering superlative outcomes. Our investment in children is a response to community health needs as Nemours aims to fulfill our mission to provide leadership, institutions and services to restore and improve the health of children through care and programs not readily available.

Nemours National Office of Policy and Prevention seeks to build upon areas of innovation and expertise at Nemours and to spread what works by achieving national policy and practice changes that have the potential to impact millions of children and families in positive ways. Particular areas of emphasis include promoting population health and prevention (including integration with clinical care); supporting healthy development and prevention in early care and education settings; and addressing the unique needs of children in health and quality initiatives.

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# Child and Adult Care Food Program Profiles

## Bristol Preschool Child Care Center

Shirley Anderson, Director

Marilyn Lobaczewski, Former Director, now Grant Specialist

Child Care Center

Enrollment of 152 children

Bristol, Connecticut

### *“We’ve come a long way!”*

In 2009, the Bristol Preschool Child Care Center was invited to participate in a Yale study aimed at improving nutrition and physical activity in young children. This study gave them a new sense of awareness about wellness and the training and education they needed to make changes. Bristol Preschool serves mostly young, working, middle-to-low income families and nearly 90% of the children attending meet eligibility requirements for free or reduced meals. The center director, Shirley Anderson, and former director, now grant specialist, Marilyn Lobaczewski, worked with Yale for over two years to ensure they were providing their children with opportunities for healthy meals they might not get at home. “In 2009, it was like pulling teeth,” remembers Anderson. “I look back now after almost four years – wow, we’ve come a long way!”

To increase excitement about fruits and vegetables, they started a preschool garden. The school sits on a large lot of land not being utilized, so they worked with the United Way to install eight 12x20 garden beds. The gardens are planted with green beans, strawberries, melons, tomatoes, sweet peppers, squashes, and more. The children help maintain them by planting, weeding, watering and harvesting. Harvested produce is added to meals and snacks whenever possible. “We use this as a way to help them learn about new foods. Last year we added cantaloupe and honeydew. We had kids who had never seen an orange or green melon. It took the three-year-olds a week just to try it!” Anderson explains.

Four years ago, when Anderson and her team started adding whole grains, a gradual approach worked best. “We were mixing pasta – whole grain with regular.” They used checkerboard sandwiches as a fun way to introduce the darker brown whole wheat bread. Today, about 60-70% of their grains are whole and the children accept them well.

They also only offer whole grain cereals with less than 2 grams of sugar. Another grain-based initiative was reducing the amount of grains as snacks to once per week – snacks on other days feature fruits and vegetables.

After overhauling the menu, Bristol no longer serves fish sticks or chicken nuggets. They try to buy cod or pollack filets, or whole muscle chicken tenderloins. “It’s a little more money, but it’s worth it,” Anderson explains. Anderson and Lobaczewski have brought on a nutritionist consultant for six hours a month to review menus and help identify new items and recipes they would like to try. To ease the introduction of those items, samples are brought straight into the classroom for the kids to try.

Anderson and her team regularly shop the grocery sale papers for deals and frequently buy in bulk, outside of their food distributor. Anderson and Lobaczewski laugh when they remember waiting for the doors to open at the local supermarket for an \$0.18/lb. sale on bananas. “You should have seen the looks we got running through the store with two grocery carts full of bananas!” Anderson jokes. In the summer, they will also go to local farms and local orchards to stock up on fruits and vegetables at low prices. “Whatever we can do to stretch the food dollar,” she adds.

To maximize efficiency and save on labor costs, they created a work plan in the kitchen to stagger cook hours. With a full-time and a part-time cook, one comes in early to get breakfast started and prep for lunch, the other comes in mid-morning, helps get lunch out and then they both work on clean up.

The entire team at Bristol Preschool is committed to improving the health and well-being of their students and families. Anderson believes support from the CACFP is what allows her to keep working toward this goal. “I’m proud that they enjoy our meals and look forward to what we have to offer. This is part of our program. All early care and education programs should be a part of CACFP. We wouldn’t be where we are today without the CACFP program and the support of our local CACFP coordinator ... It’s moving kids toward a healthy lifestyle. We’re looking forward to new guidelines and the technical assistance that comes along too.”

## Child Care Connections

Lisa Curry, CACFP Coordinator

Sponsoring Organization

Sponsor of 55-60 Family Care Homes

Bozeman, Montana

*“We helped providers develop skills they can use. They loved it!”*

The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services has strong nutrition policies in place for CACFP. “The modifications have helped move providers away from highly processed foods,” explains Lisa Curry, CACFP Coordinator. Improvements to the national requirements include reductions in the amount of juice allowable, elimination of foods like flavored milk, hot dogs, breaded meats and salted or flavored crackers. Curry states that she received very little resistance on enforcement of the state policies and this has allowed her to focus her time with the providers on nutrition education and initiatives to promote healthy eating. “A lot of it, as a CACFP sponsor, is developing a rapport with the providers so they listen to what you have to say,” she insists.

One challenge for Child Care Connections (CCC) was to focus providers on training and technical assistance during compliance reviews without causing disruption to the children at the day care homes. They found the solution in AmeriCorps. For the last two years, CCC has hosted an AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) who helps conduct nutrition education for the organization. The VISTA accompanies Curry on the majority of her provider site visits and conducts nutrition activities with the children. “She allows me to occupy more of the providers’ attention without creating chaos. She also models what you can do with kids to teach them about nutrition,” Curry asserts.

Another nutrition education project for CCC is the recent publishing of a healthy cookbook consisting of over 100 recipes with information on food components for meal crediting and cost per serving. “The cookbook was created specifically for providers and parents, trying to illustrate that feeding kids whole foods can be affordable,” emphasizes Curry. Cookbooks are given to all providers and also used at family nutrition events. “We’ve hosted family events at a variety of child care programs after hours. We cook a meal from the cookbook and host a small nutrition or cooking training with the parents and children,” she reports.



CCC is also working to give providers the skills required to create healthy meals. In 2010, Montana received a CACFP Wellness Grant from USDA to provide cook’s trainings to CACFP providers. Curry recalls the state provided funding and considerable guidance to allow sponsoring organizations to host a cook’s training for their providers. CCC used their \$4,000 mini grant to hire a registered dietitian to conduct six cook’s training sessions for nearly all the homes they sponsor. Curry received a lot of positive feedback from participants, who typically attend only lecture-based continuing education sessions. “[The trainings] helped [providers] develop skills they can use,” she insists. “They loved it!”

A final key to success for the organization is to connect home providers to community programs and resources. One resource developed by Montana Team Nutrition is *Pass the Peaches*, a how-to video on implementation of family-style dining that helps providers overcome the fear of starting family-style dining in their homes. Curry also helps introduce home providers to a local co-op called Bountiful Baskets, where a network of volunteers work together to provide low-cost fresh fruits and vegetables to the community. Curry, a big proponent of gardening, has partnered with the Agriculture program at Montana State University to provide student volunteers to help build and plant gardens at CCC homes. “Gardening is one of the best things providers can do to get their children eating fruits and vegetables,” she declares. “A garden can make the difference in kids actually eating vegetables.”

## Children's Learning Center

Lynn Weber, Executive Director

Child Care Center

Enrollment of 23 on a daily basis (35 center-wide to accommodate part-time children)

Camdenton, Missouri

### *“We know that we are doing something right.”*

Children's Learning Center (CLC) is a not-for-profit center, dedicated to providing early intervention, education and care services to children with and without special needs. In 2009, Children's Learning Center began to offer full-day services and their board of directors prioritized high-quality meals. CLC looked to the CACFP program for technical and financial support and applied for the Missouri Eat Smart Grant. “It was a no-brainer to apply for the grant to assist in funding for additional equipment that would allow us to store and serve more fresh fruits and vegetables and cook in healthier ways, such as indoor grills for meat and large steamers for vegetables,” remembers Executive Director Lynn Weber.

By implementing the strong nutrition standards of the Missouri Eat Smart program from the start, CLC avoided some of the difficult implementation obstacles. “Because CLC was so proactive in serving fruits and vegetables, we didn't really have to change the quality, but we have increased the amount of fresh and/or frozen fruits and vegetables rather than canned,” Weber explains. All bread and cereals are whole grain and contain 5 grams or less of sugar. CLC does not serve pre-fried meats or vegetables like chicken nuggets or potatoes. Oven-baked potatoes are offered only once per month, if that.

The success of family-style dining has also been a welcome surprise. “All components of the meals are served family-style to children 2 years and older. This was a big change for CLC. But the children, those with developmental differences and not, have been able to serve themselves,” she emphasizes.

Weber explains that it is more expensive for the center to serve healthy meals with a great variety of foods than the snacks they used to provide. To keep food costs under control, the food service director uses coupons and does a price match with local grocery store ads. She also purchases meat in bulk from a local butcher. The center adjusted tuition fees to compensate for the new meals provided, however, they have seen no parent complaints. “Parents were happy to pay more for high quality,” she states. “CLC gets compliments from parents, grandparents and therapist all of the time,” adds Weber.



CLC works hard to engage parents on the changes they have made. “There is a Nutrition Buzz board in the Entry Hall that contains nutrition information and physical activity suggestions. At annual Parent Orientation, parents are educated on the meal program with discussion, handouts and information,” explains Weber. They are even working with parents to replace the cupcake birthday celebration. “We've started an Eat Smart Birthday Celebration Program this year where parents can choose a themed Celebration Meal or Snack that meets meal guidelines that our Food Services Director prepares,” highlights Weber.

Weber explains that it does take time for children to adapt to the new healthy meals. “The children who are not comfortable eating healthier when they start attending CLC take about 1-2 months to become accustomed to the foods and then eat as well as children who have been attending since infancy.” Teachers and staff work to ease the transition, “If our staff eat at the table with the children, they eat the same food as the children and are always excited when there are extras for the staff.”

Weber and her team are dedicated to moving forward and continuing to provide healthy, nutritious meals for all their students. “When you see children clean their plate of healthy items and ask for more! When children prefer a piece of fruit or carrots and hummus over a sweet item, we know that we are doing something right.”

Resources: Texas Department of Agriculture.  
[www.squaremeals.org](http://www.squaremeals.org) for menu template

## Community Action of Southeast Iowa

Cheryl Flaatten, Director, and Tamee DeCoursey, CACFP Home Monitor  
Sponsoring Organization

Sponsor of 50-70 Family Day Care Homes and Two Child Care Centers  
Main office – Burlington, Iowa (Centers in Mediapolis and New  
London and Homes in Mt. Pleasant, Fort Madison, Keokuk, Burlington  
and Wapello)

*“When we are doing what we know is best for children, we are building a strong future.”*

At Community Action of Southeast Iowa, Director Cheryl Flaatten and CACFP home monitor Tamee DeCoursey provide extensive nutrition education and training for their over 50 family day care home providers. To meet the two-hour annual state training requirement, Community Action of Southeast Iowa provides a variety of annual trainings, as well as three home reviews per year, for each day care home, which include a nutrition activity for providers and kids. Trainings focus on menu planning, healthy cooking techniques, introducing new foods, and strategies to control costs. In addition to DeCoursey’s in-home activities, she hosts grocery store tours and cooking workshops.

Flaatten and DeCoursey closely monitor upcoming regulation changes to best prepare their providers. “If we hear something might be coming down the pike we get on it right away ... We work on getting our providers ready, so the changes won’t be a big deal,” says Flaatten. When it looked like USDA regulations would begin to only allow nonfat or low-fat milk, DeCoursey hosted a blind milk taste test to help providers overcome their own fears of switching to low-fat milk.

For planned reviews, DeCoursey discusses the activity ahead of time with each provider to incorporate components of a reimbursable meal. Activities could include reading a book about vegetable soup, then making it with the children, or introducing children to new fruits and vegetables, like horned melons or mangos. One recent activity had providers making homemade whole wheat tortillas. The activities carry on after DeCoursey is gone as well. After the tortilla activity, one of her providers called her to tell her she used some leftover whole wheat flour in her cookie recipe. “She told me ‘the kids like [the cookies], and the parents liked them too!’ Sometimes we just have to get over the attitudes [against healthy eating],” stresses DeCoursey.

DeCoursey goes to great lengths to make the activities fun and memorable. She has dressed up like a rabbit to encourage children to eat carrots and brought in baby chicks to teach kids about eggs. DeCoursey laughs when she remembers bringing a spaghetti squash to a cooking demonstration. While explaining how easy it is to cook right in the microwave, the squash exploded! “I told them, ‘you know its done when its explodes!’ and we all had a good laugh. I bring a lot of passion, and humor!” she says.

The providers can’t say enough great things about DeCoursey and the Community Action trainings. Vicki Augustine, a family home provider, describes, “My CACFP Sponsor brings information and hands-on activities for the children throughout the year. This year we made bread!” Susan Rettig, another home provider, agrees, “I attend annual training by my CACFP Sponsor and participate in home reviews where I always learn new ideas to share with both the children and their parents.”

One challenge for the organization is meeting the needs of a diverse group of CACFP providers. DeCoursey focuses on experiential learning through hands-on activities and provides lots of real-life examples. “I try to give as many visuals as possible. When I taught about MyPlate, I actually took the separated compartment plate. It has to be hands on,” she emphasizes. Another successful strategy for Community Action of Southeast Iowa is to facilitate mentoring among providers. “We know who our strong ones are and they take the younger ones under their wings,” says Flaatten.

Flaatten and DeCoursey appreciate all the CACFP program provides to allow them to be successful. “The CACFP strengthens the nation as a whole. When we are doing what we know is best for children we are building a strong future,” says Flaatten. “CACFP teaches children how to fish. Children learn healthy habits that will last a lifetime. This builds a strong workforce, strong defense system, and creates self-sufficiency in our society,” adds DeCoursey. She also reminds other sponsors never to give up. “You have to have fun at your job. Sometimes, when I do things, it doesn’t always work out, sometimes a spaghetti squash blows up in the microwave. It is just as important to show them that your best ideas might flop, but you have to keep trying.”

## Georgetowne Home Preschool

Debra Poole, Owner

Family Home Day Care

Enrollment of 24 – Two half-day sessions of 12 children each

Ocala, Florida

### *“I know that nutrition is key.”*

When Debra Poole began the Georgetowne Home Preschool in 1995, she was more than 100 pounds overweight and didn't appreciate the value of a healthy lifestyle. However, she learned quickly the critical role between nutrition and learning. Now 18 years and nearly 400 students later, she is in the best shape of her life, feeling great, and sharing her wisdom of nutrition and health with the preschoolers under her care. “I've lost a lot of weight taking care of other people's kids,” she declares. And even though she runs two separate half-day sessions, and isn't required to offer Florida's Child Care Food Program (CCFP), she does it anyway. “We choose to because without nutrition they won't be able to learn. I know that nutrition is key,” she affirms.

“When they start with me, they might be Kool-Aid drinkers, on a pacifier, or still using a sippy cup ... but you know they are a little piece of clay and you are able to make a difference,” emphasizes Poole. Exposing four-year-olds to a brand-new way of eating isn't always easy, but Poole is dedicated to teaching children how the foods they eat impact their bodies and the way they feel. Poole encourages children to try new fruits and vegetables by incorporating them into daily lessons. “We eat our colors every day. We light up our brain. We [use fruits and vegetables] to talk about shapes, colors and textures,” she says.

Family-style dining and positive reinforcement are also integral to Poole's success. Poole believes family-style dining teaches responsibility and gives her the opportunity to introduce foods at the right pace for each child. Poole starts small with unfamiliar items, asking children to take as little as one lima bean or one blueberry, if necessary. “I encourage them, and I talk positive. If they don't try it, then I encourage them the next day.” According to Poole, something as simple as a sticker can be the key to getting kids to try – and eventually like new foods. Above all else, the most important piece for Poole is trust. “Once they bond with you, you can take them a long way.”

To keep her costs manageable, Poole shops around and compares prices. She keeps a lookout for buy-one-get-one-free deals at the local supermarket and frequently shops at fruit and vegetable stands for produce. Poole also stretches her food dollar through buying in quantity and doing much of the prep herself. “I buy whole chickens. I can do a lot with a chicken. We might have baked chicken one day, then use what's remaining to make chicken soup.”

Poole is quick to credit her sponsor, Beverly Wilks of Infant and Child Nutrition, Inc., for providing the guidance and resources she needs to do her job well. “She is a team-player, in training and being supportive,” she stresses. Wilks and Poole share a passion for nutrition and health, and Wilks works to instill that passion in the 70 day care home providers she sponsors. “I take a little extra time every time I go to a provider's home just talking and telling them about any new food program news or anything I have learned about healthy eating. Although the paperwork is extremely important in running the program, I really try to focus as much as I can on nutrition,” declares Wilks.

Georgetowne Home Preschool is also providing healthy meals, in part, due to strong nutrition standards set by the Florida Department of Health. For the last 10 years, the state agency has been working gradually to improve the healthfulness of meals provided through CCFP. “In 2002, we implemented a policy that limited ready-to-eat cereals to 10 grams of sugar or less ... [since then] we limited juice to once per day and we require at least two servings of whole fruits and/or vegetables at breakfast and snack each week,” explains Brenda Crosby, public health nutrition administrator for the Florida Department of Health. “We're proud of it, because we started this back when it wasn't the in thing to do,” she insists.

Beverly Wilks appreciates the work of the Florida Department of Health. “I'm very proud of our state for taking the initiative to support healthy eating,” she stresses. She also relies on the resources the state develops. “We have a very helpful state agency that sends us many resources to give to our providers. *A Dozen Ways to Be Healthy* is a 12-month curriculum in nutrition. It is a great resource for day care homes, and a new *Lub Dub* book about a healthy heart was actually written by state agency staff.”

From the state to the sponsor to the provider to the child, it takes a team effort to instill healthy habits that will last a lifetime. Poole and the team around her are committed to making that difference for children, day in and day out. “When you look at a healthy child, they have a twinkle in their eye. That's what makes me wake up in the morning.”

## JoAnn's Helping Hands

JoAnn Clarke

Group Day Care Home

Enrollment of 14

Sterling Heights, Michigan

### *“We are setting up our children for a lifetime of healthy eating.”*

When she started JoAnn's Helping Hands (JHH) 14 years ago, JoAnn Clarke knew nutrition would be one of her priorities. “One of the things I wanted to focus on was to nourish the children from the inside out,” she recalls.

Clarke's mom taught her to serve delicious, home-cooked meals for her family that are not only healthy, but budget-friendly too. Her steamer, pressure cooker and Crock-Pot® are best friends in her kitchen, and buying in bulk is critical to her success. Clarke buys large quantities of meats from the butcher, and fruits and vegetables in season from the fruit and farmers markets. She does the majority of peeling, chopping and cooking herself. She even purchases a grass-fed cow and pig with her sister once a year to supply the day care with hormone-free, farm-fed beef and pork all year long.

To make time for all the scratch cooking, Clarke prepares dinner for her own family, then serves her day care children the same meal for lunch the following day. The families she serves depend on the healthy, balanced meals their children receive daily. “At pick-up time, parents always comment on how good it smells when they walk into my home. For the last couple years, I have joked about starting a program where parents could pre-order dinner to-go at the same time they come in to get their children ... who knows – that may be a new business venture one day!” It is not unusual for parents trying to recreate their child's favorites to call on weekends, evenings and even from the grocery store asking for recipes.

Clarke serves whole grains almost exclusively – wheat bread, whole wheat pasta and oatmeal to name a few. “It was not a huge transition for me. I have never served white bread to my own or my day care children. We eat multigrain or wheat,” she insists. Clarke makes her own bread crumbs to bread homemade chicken tenders, tilapia and flounder or to use in made-from-scratch meatballs and meatloaf. She even uses bulgur and quinoa in some of her recipes.

Fresh fruits and vegetables are menu staples. “In-season vegetables taste so much better and they are cheaper,” she explains. She offers lots of preparation methods, colors, shapes and textures to make fruits and vegetables more appealing. After her first experience with sweet potato fries at a local restaurant, Clarke whipped up her own version baked with a little paprika and a touch of maple syrup. They were a hit. She adds veggies into meals whenever possible, including homemade soups, which she prepares and serves all year long. Her group loves steamed veggies, especially broccoli, cauliflower and carrots. They get involved in the process by helping stock her steamer with fresh vegetables. “The children love to watch me fill the different tiers. Maybe they eat more of it because they are helping me make them.” Clarke works hard to keep food fun and exciting. “We cut the fruits in lots of different ways when serving,” she explains. Pineapple, for example, might be served in a ring, or a wedge, or even mixed into a yogurt smoothie.

Clarke credits family-style dining to some of her success. “All day long we talk about how we are a family. At mealtimes, we sit around the table and we talk just like a family would at dinnertime. They call each other day care brothers and sisters.” Children are encouraged to try everything and consume at least a “no thank you bite.” Of course, this rarely happens at JHH, she has a house full of good eaters. “The power of peers is huge in this setting,” she says.

Clarke works hard each day to create a positive triangle between the parent, child and caregiver. Providing good, healthy food is one of the essential ways she provides quality care. “I often tell other providers ... you don't have to be a gourmet cook to put a good cut of meat in a pot of water with fresh vegetables and seasoning. You don't have to be behind a stove all day to make great, flavorful meals. Make the time to look up recipes. Take the time to sit down and balance your meals. We are setting up our children for a life of healthy eating.”

**Kids Depot Child Care**  
Nancy Karn, Administrator  
Stephanie Thompson, Director  
Child Care Center  
Enrollment of 45  
Madison, Wisconsin

## “Parents are looking for this!”

Changes for Kids Depot Child Care began when one of their parents, a nutritionist at the University of Wisconsin, came forward with a few “polite suggestions.” Nancy Karn, administrator of Kids Depot, recalls, “She came to us with some ideas of ways to incorporate wellness into the school, and they seemed like things we could implement.” The parent also introduced them to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s (DPI) *Active Early* initiative. They applied for a grant and received \$7,500 to begin to incorporate 120 minutes per day of physical activity for kids 2 and up. Policy changes were required as part of the program, as well as a review of daily menus. Following the initial grant, Kids Depot was invited by the Wisconsin DPI to participate in a wellness grant to implement the *Healthy Bites* program, where they did a more intense revamp of their nutrition policies and practices.

Previously, menus included items like chicken nuggets and corn dogs; now they feature casseroles and other made-from-scratch recipes. A fish or seafood entrée is offered once per week consisting of items like tuna and haddock. They have also drastically reduced the amount of pre-fried potatoes. “French fries are now only served once per month,” explains Stephanie Thompson, Kid’s Depot director.

Karn and Thompson agree, gradual implementation is the way to go. “We will eliminate and replace things slowly,” says Karn. “And we don’t give up,” adds Thompson. They serve new menu items three times before making a decision to permanently add the item to the cycle menu. Taste Test Tuesdays provide additional opportunities to expose kids to new fruits and vegetables and try out new recipes.

Teacher buy-in is another key to their success. Karn and Thompson encourage their teachers to model healthy eating and try new foods while eating with the children. Teachers sit in on all nutrition trainings and receive nutrition education. They are encouraged to participate in any new initiatives. “The teachers are the best route to getting them to try it and like it”, reports Karn. “We feel very lucky to have the staff we have. They are so on board and understand the reasoning behind these changes.”

The center recently installed raised garden beds and fruit trees. Crops like green beans provide enough for about three meals, and cherry tomatoes and cucumbers are added to meals all summer. Each classroom is in charge of getting the gardens ready, by planting, weeding and harvesting. “Children are so excited when they get to pick a bean or a tomato,” asserts Karn.

One challenge for the pair was identifying whole grains and finding options that were affordable. After pulling some tips from the *Healthy Bites* resource to learn label reading, purchasing techniques and identification of whole grains, they are on the right track. “Now everything is whole grain – waffles, pancakes, bagels, buns,” reports Thompson. “The kids don’t even acknowledge the difference,” she adds.

Another challenge, constantly balancing costs and searching for the best prices. Thompson explains, “Food costs have really gone up, though not necessarily the cost of healthy foods. Fresh oranges and bananas are usually more cost effective than canned fruits for us. And it is cheaper for us to serve a taco salad than corn dogs. Processed foods can be a lot more than scratch items.” Scratch cooking drastically reduces costs for the center, as does making their own homemade baby food. “The parents certainly appreciate it and we save money doing it ourselves.” Thompson scours the community to find the best milk prices, too. If the best price in town is at the local gas station that is where they are stocking up for the week.

The toughest hurdle so far – implementation of a “no food from home” policy about three years ago. “Birthday treats, the cakes and cookies from home, were really a disservice to the kids,” tells Karn. “We do so many fun things for their birthdays already,” she adds. Now parents bring in stickers and other non-food items to celebrate. Karn and Thompson work hard to involve parents through a monthly newsletter, parent surveys and lots of communication. Parent feedback has been extremely positive. Thompson explains, “We hear a lot from prospective families, it helps marketing-wise too. Parents are looking for this!”

Resources: *Healthy Bites*, *Active Early*, *SPARK*, *Color Me Healthy*, *Active Early*: <http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/P0/P00280.pdf>

## Neighborhood House Association

Kristine Smith, MS, RD, Director of Nutrition Services  
Child Care Center (Head Start)  
Enrollment of 2,000 children across 26 sites  
San Diego, California

### *“I thought we could do better.”*

When Kristine Smith started as director of nutrition services for the Neighborhood House Association (NHA) six years ago, there wasn't a lot of cooking going on. “We were always meeting the USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) regulations, but we were opening can after can of fruits and vegetables. I thought we could do better,” she recalls. She took a year to assess the functionality of the kitchen and realized, “We were missing a chef! Why not bring a restaurant flair to institutional cooking?”

So they hired a chef and completed a major overhaul of the program. “We changed where things were placed [in the kitchen], how our carts are set up, and ordering. Everything changed. The new meals are completely from scratch – even the menu looks different!” Smith declares. Smith is quick to give credit to the chefs who have worked in the program since the overhaul. “The creative recipes and names come from the chef. We tweak the menu every month depending on our Harvest of the Month, and he develops four new recipes each time. All of that creativity is totally him.” And while hiring a chef was definitely the right decision for NHA, Smith warns that you have to find the right person for the job. “They can't make changes on the fly like you can in a restaurant. The chef has to be respectful of the regulations and requirements. It's really important to communicate early on that while creativity is highly encouraged within the USDA's guidelines, the chef also plays a big role in a successful CACFP review.”

Now menus feature items like herbed cottage cheese, lemon dill hummus, Caribbean black bean soup and herbed panko cod. Smith lights up when she talks about their “signature snack,” roasted sweet potato mixed with organic yogurt. Smith works with a local bakery to provide fresh muffins and other bread products. “We went back and forth about 10 times until they got the right size and the right ingredients,” she recounts. “The bakery found the product we created together was better and are now producing it in their store front. This is another way our menu is extending into the community.”

NHA is a great example of the power of training. Even with sweeping changes to the kitchen, production and recipes, Smith and her chef have been able to coach their staff up to the new system. “Most of my staff are still here ... we have very little turnover,” notes Smith. “We have the same people that did the old meal service before. They were doing their best before, and they are doing their best now.”

In addition to her hard-working staff, Smith credits the supportive leadership team at NHA. “This overhaul was a major change at NHA that resulted in the conception of numerous other health-related initiatives in the agency. Without the resilient support from the upper chain of command, our successful improvement of child nutrition may not have happened.”

Smith and her chef have also come up with a number of approaches to control costs. One strategy is a five-week menu cycle that uses low cost ingredients like chicken and beans. Close monitoring of food production and waste reduces cost for the program. “We used to toss out the end of the zucchini, but realized, if you roast it its fine. We have really reduced food waste, which saves,” Smith notes. “We are meticulous to analyze food production. Where we are sending too many meals, where we need to send more. There isn't even software that could take the place of these massive excel spreadsheets.”

Smith admits their approach to the meal program is not the easiest, but she is satisfied with the high-quality healthy product she gives to children in her program each day. When asked about her proudest moments, she will give two – national recognition from *Let's Move! Child Care* and the parent who calls to get the recipe to recreate their child's favorite NHA recipe at home.

## Richfield Child Development Center

Kelley Huff, Director/Owner

Child Care Center

Enrollment of 163

Richfield, North Carolina

### *“The transformation has been amazing!”*

“I came into this business not knowing what worked best,” declares Kelley Huff, owner and director of the Richfield Child Development Center. Huff started a small child care center after the birth of her fourth child, armed only with parenting experience and a love of children. Little did she know what was in store for her in the next 17 years. “I eat, drink and sleep these babies here. They mean the world to me,” she says.

In 2011, Huff attended a workshop on preschool gardens at a CACFP conference. Huff, who grew up on a farm, knew her way around a garden, but proclaims, “I do not have a green thumb!” She was so impressed by the workshop, she set out to start a small garden for her center. “I found some planters on clearance at Lowe’s, parents donated some supplies, and we used old mulch from the playground as soil,” she recalls. It was a low-budget operation, but a successful one. “I think it was the children’s tender loving care that made it turn out so well!” Huff asserts. Children were going home excited about fruits and vegetables, and parents were eagerly awaiting Huff’s daily Facebook picture posts of the children tending the garden. “It’s the most amazing thing we’ve ever done!”

Piggybacking on all this excitement about nutrition, Huff received a grant to attend a state culinary training out of Charlotte, North Carolina. After coming home from the training, she gutted her menu. Old menus featured frozen French fries, hot dogs, white loaf bread, 70% lean hamburger meat and Kool-Aid®. Now you will find chicken vegetable potpie with a whole wheat crust, Brussels sprouts, butternut squash, whole wheat muffins and 100% juice (served three or fewer times per week). “We have no processed meats, we do 90% lean ground beef, nothing is fried, nothing is frozen ... and no hot dogs! My menu looks completely different than it did 12-18 months ago,” she exclaims.



To keep costs under control, Huff shops at three different stores and buys in bulk. When a new Wal-Mart opened up in town, Huff went to the local Food Lion manager to renegotiate a new price on milk. Huff also saves by cooking from scratch, including homemade biscuits and homemade muffins with whole wheat flour added in.

Buy-in from her teachers has been key. “The teachers join in and eat with them to show them you can eat it.” She also considers regular communication with parents via a dry erase board at the pick-up location and through her Facebook page to be critical. Another positive change is an arrangement with the local Pfeiffer University to provide 6- to 8-week swim lessons for her four-year-olds. “My center has changed completely in the past 18 months. We have a garden, PE classes, the menus have improved, and we have formed a partnership with Pfeiffer University (athletic department). The transformation has been amazing!” exclaims Huff. “I have the best job in the whole wide world, I hope these children know how much I love them. It isn’t a job, it is a mission.”

## Salt Lake Community Action Program

Jennifer Godfrey, Health Manager

Child Care Center (Head Start)

Enrollment of 2,000

Salt Lake City, Utah

*“This is one of the most rewarding things we have ever started.”*

About five years ago, a food-service contractor provided meals for the Salt Lake Community Action Program (CAP) Head Start. Breakfast and lunch arrived packaged in TV dinner trays and was warmed and served onsite. New to the Health Manager position at the time, Jennifer Godfrey remembers Head Start Director Erin Trenbeath-Murray asking her out to lunch. Trenbeath-Murray sat her down and pulled out two of the meal trays, then told her if they could both eat the meal for lunch they wouldn't change a thing. “We couldn't do it,” recalls Godfrey. “Both of us have young children. We knew we wouldn't feed it to our kids.” Together, they made the decision then and there to revamp the meal program.

Trenbeath-Murray and Godfrey envisioned a change to made-from-scratch meals using fresh organic ingredients with a strong emphasis on nutrient-dense foods and beverages, such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, low-fat milk products and lean meats. After getting quotes from several different food service contractors, none could provide the type of meals they wanted at the CACFP price point. “If we can't find anyone, what's the risk of taking this on ourselves?” they thought. They decided to bring in all their Head Start managers to discuss their vision. “We wanted to gauge how everyone felt because [starting an in-house meal program] would pull dollars from other places,” explains Godfrey. By the end of the meeting, “everyone was on board and passionate about the project,” she insists.

The first step was to find a chef who could make nutritious, home-cooked meals within the budgetary constraints of the CACFP program, all while managing the construction of a new kitchen facility. They found their answer in Brian Ralph, a chef with an impressive resumé as former food service manager for the 2002 Winter Olympic Village, Louisiana State University and the University of Colorado.



After a failed attempt to use the kitchen at a local housing project, they began to work out of the kitchen of a Greek Orthodox Church. The pilot test was to provide meals for 300 children at their largest center. Godfrey remembers, “We had a nutritionist to review our menus, CACFP [State Agency] was aware and provided help, even the fire marshal worked with us. We did our first run and [meal trays] were coming back empty. It went off without a hitch!” Godfrey was touched by the response of the children. “Kids didn't know what some of the foods were – fresh strawberries. Things that are so simple, that I take for granted. That was something I wasn't prepared for.”

With things running smoothly it was time for phase two, construction of a new facility. Salt Lake CAP came up with a business plan and started a \$1 million capital campaign. “We had it planned out down to the penny,” Godfrey affirms. They reached out to local restaurants to buy used equipment, repainted used Penske U-Haul trucks, and worked with contractors who provided in-kind services. The community came together to make this a possibility.

Construction now complete, meal counts grew quickly. “We went from 300 meals to 750 to 1,200 – all in three months! We kept waiting for the day it would fall apart, but it didn't, it was seamless. We just kept moving forward. It was almost like it was a natural fit,” recounts Godfrey. About 9 months in, the team had a good grasp on the system and it was working well. Teachers were working with students in the classroom to introduce new foods. Parents were clamoring to get their children the new meals. The Board was ecstatic with the program success. The only problem, they were nearly \$200,000 in the hole, with funding coming out of the federal Head Start grant and they weren't sure how to keep Ralph and his team employed year-round. They started looking for cost-saving ideas and strategies, outside of the CACFP program, to generate revenue using the new facility.



They began by forming a buying co-op with local school districts to bring down food costs. Within the meal program, they implemented strategies like incorporating weekly vegetarian dishes, such as red beans and rice. Another strategy, serving soup on Mondays which saves labor hours with prep done the Friday before and allows kitchen staff to use up leftovers from the previous week. Now, average meal food cost is down around \$1.10 per meal.

The next step was to identify new sources of revenue. The first summer, they worked with their CACFP state agency to start a summer dinner program at three sites. The dinner program paid kitchen staff salaries for the summer. The following summer they doubled meal production and doubled revenue. Then, they began outsourcing meals to other child care programs along their delivery route. By using the same menu, they were able to increase production and maximize economies of scale, all without additional overhead. “Slowly things started to shift from us being in the hole, to us breaking even, and then starting to generate revenue,” says Godfrey.

Today, meals are made from scratch with fresh local and organic ingredients. Seasonal menus feature culturally and ethnically diverse options that help broaden children’s food experiences. On the menu, you may find options like Zambian beef, salmon linguine, pumpkin soup, Brussels sprouts sautéed in apple juice, or potato medley with white, purple and red potatoes. All grains are whole grain. Milk is only low fat and unflavored and no juice is served.

The program supports operational costs, provides high-quality meals, and pays above-market salaries to kitchen staff. “We have had zero turnover. In four years, I’ve never had someone leave,” says Ralph. “We made these guys be proud of what they do,” he adds.

The entire team at Salt Lake CAP is proud of what they have accomplished. “Our kids are eating better, people are getting paid better and we aren’t losing money!” asserts Ralph. Godfrey agrees, “Four years ago, I would have never imagined that we would do what we’re doing. I never would have imagined how many people we have touched. This is one of the most rewarding things we have ever started.” One added bonus, the kitchen now functions as the site for a parent job-training program. This project is not only improving the health and well-being of children through nutrition, it is now breaking the cycle of poverty by giving their parents the skills necessary to provide for their families.



## Salvation Army Early Learning Center

Kathy Gill, Director of Children's Services

Child Care Center

Enrollment of 90 in full-day child care and 50 in after-school care  
Wilmington, Delaware



### *“We needed to do our part.”*

The Salvation Army Center decided it was time to make a change when they started experiencing childhood obesity firsthand at their center. Director Kathy Gill explains, “Through the years (I have been here 38 years), there has been a change in the number we have of overweight children. We took part in the Nemours Child Care Learning Collaborative and the information we received was scary to see the incline of overweight children. We needed to do our part.”

The first changes came by switching to whole grains. “All our bread, crackers and rolls are whole grain. We serve brown rice and pasta. We limit the sugar intake by reading labels before purchasing items,” she reports. They are also serving many more fresh fruits and vegetables. Every Wednesday they have added a fourth fruit or vegetable serving to the menu to expose children to new and unfamiliar foods. “We make it something new for the children to try (ex: beets, eggplant, okra, kiwi),” asserts Gill. In place of chicken nuggets and fish sticks, you will find chicken breast slices or baked fish. Cookies and sweet snacks have been eliminated and the only beverages you will find are water and milk – low fat for children older than two. “No juice is served!” declares Gill enthusiastically.

Most unexpectedly to the staff, the changes have been accepted well by the children. “The immediate response from adults was that the children would not eat the brown bread, rice, pasta, and where was the juice. Surprisingly the children eat great!” Gill recalls. The new meals have exceeded parent expectations as well. “We had an event where the parents came for breakfast and we served them what the children ate and they were surprised how good it was,” she recalls.

Even though meal improvements come with a slightly higher price tag, Gill and her staff are committed to keeping the changes. “These changes have been more costly to our budget, but changes we felt are important since the children receive two-thirds of their daily nutrition while with us,” she insists. Gill has made room in her existing budget to accommodate the higher costs, but works diligently with vendors and buys in-season produce to save money. “Our sales rep is good about knowing what items we will serve and gives us ideas of other items that fit our meal patterns. We will change the fruits we buy if the season is high and purchase the more reasonable product.”

Gill believes their success may not have been possible without technical assistance and support from *Let's Move Child Care*. “We do have to credit the Nemours year-long project for helping us learn more about healthy eating and exercise. We all had homework and readings to do. New activities were shared with us along with musical CDs the children love to move to. Learning about food is not just a topic for one unit but an ongoing process.” The partnership has allowed the center to begin initiatives outside of meals as well. “I am really proud of a new project we did in the fall and plan to continue this spring, and that is our gardening project. With support and a financial incentive we received from Nemours, we had two raised beds built in our play yard and the preschool class planted kale, spinach, turnips and lettuce,” Gill reports. “The children did the planting and the watering and they tried new vegetables. The parents would go outside to check on the garden with their child. This has been a rewarding experience,” she adds.

The children are eating more healthy meals and parents are excited about the changes. “We feel our greatest accomplishment is just getting the children to eat the healthy food and sometimes even ask for more vegetables,” emphasizes Gill. Even her staff, skeptical at first, has come around. “I am also proud of my staff for their commitment in learning not only about healthy eating but exercise and outdoor games to use in their classrooms.” This is just the beginning for the Salvation Army Learning Center.

## St. John's Lutheran Early Learning Center

Kelly Ann Reilly, Director

Child Care Center

Enrollment of 96

Dover, Delaware

### *“We are making a difference in children's lives.”*

St. John's Lutheran Early Learning Center was inspired to make changes to improve child health and wellness after becoming involved with the Nemours Child Care Learning Collaborative. “We previously had parents pack lunches for the children and it became difficult to constantly monitor the lunches that were provided. We were noticing that the lunches were unbalanced and unhealthy and we really wanted to do our part to instill healthy habits while the children were young,” recalls Kelly Ann Reilly, director of the center. They began participating in CACFP in September 2012 and couldn't be happier. Reilly explains, “We have been so pleased with our decision to participate in CACFP. The benefits for children are endless. Not only are they eating healthier meals, but they are learning about what foods are healthy and that is knowledge that they can carry with them throughout their lives.”

The state agency staff at the Delaware Department of Education helped St. John's get off to a great start. “Our pre-approval meeting with the representative from the CACFP was wonderful. She walked us through how it would work for us and what to expect. Since she was previously a center director, she had firsthand experience and insight to share.” State resources made all the difference. “The CACFP toolkits that were provided are so helpful! The recipes and sample menus really helped us with our planning. We are also a huge fan of the CACFP Meal Pattern Chart, we use it every day!”

CACFP participants in Delaware are required to follow strong state standards including required servings of whole grains, cereals with less than 6 grams of sugar per serving, lots of fruits and vegetables and no high-fat fried or pre-fried meats, fruits or vegetables. Reilly and her team have taken the standards in stride. “When we began with CACFP, we changed all breads and cereals to whole grain,” she says. “The children are now receiving a fruit or vegetable each morning for breakfast and two different fruits/vegetables with their lunch. For many of the children, they are having great experiences with trying new things.”

The response has been overwhelmingly positive. “The children have loved the new foods that are being offered!” she says. Parents are even shocked to see what their children are now eating as a result of the new meal program. “Although some of the parents were a little nervous about the program in the beginning, they have really grown to love it! They were always enthused about not having to pack a lunch, but were concerned about whether their child would eat the different foods that were prepared ... they have been pleasantly surprised!”

Reilly insists the program has not been cost prohibitive. “CACFP has tremendously helped our budget. We previously provided a morning and afternoon snack for the children without any reimbursement. As a result of adding the food program, we are now able to serve morning breakfast, lunch and afternoon snack while being reimbursed for all food costs, all supplies needed for food service (paper products, etc.) as well as offsetting payroll for some employees directly responsible for Food Program duties.” They continue to be able to support the program within the reimbursement without adding additional funds.

This is not to say there have not been challenges. Starting an in-house meal program has its share of trials and tribulations. Reilly and her team experienced difficulty determining what kids would eat and how much. “Our greatest challenge was figuring out the shopping. Since we previously did not cook any meals, it was a big adjustment in the beginning to figure how much of each item to purchase and how much to cook.”

Excitement about the new meals has turned into healthy initiatives for the center, like a Family Recipe Exchange. Other ways Reilly engages parents are through family orientations and an updated food policy in the Parent Handbook.

Most of all, the St. John's team is happy to be instilling lifelong healthy habits into their children. The greatest joy for Reilly comes from, “watching the children get excited about eating healthy foods and knowing that we are making a difference in their lives.”

## Youth and Family Outreach

Camelia Babson, Program Director

Angela Nelson, DTR, Chef

Child Care Center

Enrollment of 60

Portland, Maine

***“I really want to tell our story, because it can be done. Our program is proof of that!”***

About five years ago, Youth and Family Outreach (YFO) started to become interested in changing the nutrition quality of their program. They started slowly by making the commitment to move to only whole grains. Then they switched to high gear, when they had an opportunity to conduct a search for a new chef. “I looked for someone interested in whole foods and scratch baking,” tells Camelia Babson, program director. “I wanted to find someone with that experience to develop recipes and do production reports, someone who knew how to work with vendors and seek out people to work with that have similar ideals about sound nutrition. Another reason for doing this was support to local farmers and businesses.”

They found a chef and started working with *Let's Go 5-2-1-0*, a childhood obesity prevention program in Maine, to begin implementing changes like eliminating juice from menus and adding more scratch cooking and more local fresh meats and produce. This past August, YFO welcomed Angela Nelson, DTR. Nelson is a dietetic technician, registered, with restaurant and baking experience and a degree in horticulture. Nelson has gone to great lengths to develop relationships with local vendors and local farmers. During the growing season, they purchase over 85% of their food locally. Bomb Diggity Bakery in Portland, Maine, provides all their breads and granola bars, at lower prices than national wholesale brands. Oakhurst Dairy provides Maine-fresh hormone- and antibiotic-free milk. Local farms provide a huge variety of fresh meats, eggs, and seasonal fruits and vegetables.

YFO saves money by serving meat only once per week. Nelson is a vegetarian herself and very skilled at preparing meals to provide complete proteins that meet CACFP standards. Meatless meals include delicious dishes such as roasted chickpeas with turmeric potatoes, Costa Rican beans and rice, pesto pasta with black bean tempeh, and enchilada lasagna with local beans, cheese and spinach. You will never find a tater tot or chicken nuggets either – only home-cooked potatoes and an occasional chicken breast with cornflake breading. They even serve kale chips, a center favorite.

One strategy to fund meal improvements is through fund-raisers. Last year, YFO raised \$4,500 through their Trot for Tots 5K Run/Walk. A new, exciting endeavor is a cookbook of center and family-submitted recipes. According to the YFO website, “After receiving so much interest in our nutrition program, we have decided to showcase some of it in a cookbook which is also a fund-raiser for the program.”

Babson touts the importance of family-style dining, which has been in place at YFO for the last 10 years. Children serve their own meals and pour their drinks, even the children in the under 3s room serve their own bread. “Its such a great way to teach portion sizes. We say its practice for Kindergarten,” she adds. They also work to incorporate nutrition into the curriculum. “We feel it is important for the children to learn about where their food comes from and how it arrives at their table. To assist with this, we have put in four raised garden beds and the children have planted seedlings. Each classroom has a day to care for the garden during the week,” Babson explains. Babson describes her greatest success as “the change I see in the children!”

All this scratch cooking, local purchasing and nutrition education is an amazing feat considering their tiny kitchen and small administrative staff of Babson, Nelson and one administrative assistant. Nelson does most of the cooking to feed 50 children daily on two induction burners and some electric skillets and griddles. Even in the face of challenges, Babson and her staff are dedicated to feed children nutritious meals and teach them where food comes from. “I really want to tell our story, because it can be done. Our program is proof of that!”

Resources: Let's Go 5-2-1-0 for child care, United Way toolkit for preschool teachers. Cooking matters recipes.

## YMCA Mt. Hope Child Care Center

Carol Jo Mahoney

Child Care Center

Enrollment of 100

Providence, Rhode Island

### *“It’s just not that hard.”*

After struggling for years with her weight and poor eating habits, Carol Jo Mahoney turned things around in her own life and started making healthy choices. Now, she is eating right and staying physically active. “I believe in it for kids, and when raising my own kids. Especially being a part of an organization like the Y. You have to walk the walk. We have to be an example!”

In 2011, YMCA of the USA committed to establishing minimums for physical activity, maximums for screen time, and setting healthy food and beverages standards for the 700,000 children in its early childhood and after-school programs. Mahoney, who works at the national level to train other early childhood providers on the standard, says, “I have trained about 70 people across the country ... there are always roadblocks and reasons why they can’t. The thing is, if you really want to do it you can. There is no reason students can’t be receiving healthy meals.”

At the YMCA Mt. Hope Child Care Center, Mahoney ensures all meals meet the Y standards. “Our center actually meets all the standards,” she explains. “I write my own menu and send it to the catering company. I will send menus that meet the Y requirements,” she adds. Each meal contains a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. All vegetables are steamed. “We don’t serve fried foods of any kind,” Mahoney describes.

Mahoney also strongly believes in family-style dining. “People say it’s too difficult and takes up too much time,” she notes. “We definitely save time because we are not serving up 20 trays of food [to each classroom]. It’s much quicker. Everything is dished up in the kitchen in table-sized servings and delivered to the classrooms.” Children are asked to take a minimum amount of each item, to ensure reimbursable meal criteria is met. Mahoney usually doesn’t have much of a problem getting children to eat. “This is one place peer pressure is awesome!” she adds.



A recent addition was the installation of a water source in each classroom to provide free, clean drinking water for the kids. At Mt. Hope, very little juice is served, so water is the drink of choice. Some careful negotiation with Brown University provided the funding for the new sinks and faucets in return for some reserved spots in the infant and toddler rooms for Brown faculty, staff and student families. Mahoney is enthusiastic about the renovations, “With self access to the sinks, they drink much more water.”

Mahoney also gets excited when she talks about their nutrition education curriculum, *Food and Fun After School*. *Food and Fun After School* is a curriculum developed by the Harvard School of Public Health Prevention Center on Nutrition and Physical Activity to help children develop healthy habits. The curriculum provides activities to teach children about nutrition in a fun and active way. Mahoney loves that families are incorporated as well, through handouts, emails and customizable newsletters to send home. “The family education piece is just as important as getting the food out to the kids. One of our goals is to educate families to make healthier choices at home, so we try to provide that for them,” Mahoney says. Every month they choose a different healthy theme for the center bulletin board. Mahoney believes this is a great way to expose parents to healthy messaging without lecturing. She is also constantly working to encourage her staff to model the healthy behaviors as well.

Mahoney urges providers to take a gradual approach to success. “Don’t make it so overbearing that it’s overwhelming,” she warns. “Do it in baby steps and be good at it.” She also believes early child care providers should be held to a high standard. “We have to press forward, this is why we are doing it, for the physical health of these children. This is what we have to do.”

## YWCA of Asheville

Tami Ruckman, Director of Development

Child Care Center

Enrollment of 75 in full-day child care, 125 in after-school care, and

150 in drop-in care

Asheville, North Carolina

*“We’ve decided we are going to stick with it, because it’s the right thing.”*

Picture delicious dishes like carrot cake oatmeal, chickpea stew with coconut curry, or cranberry and vanilla brown rice pudding. Gourmet meals such as these could only be found at a five-star restaurant and ... the CACFP-sponsored meal program at the YWCA of Asheville.

Across the country, the YWCA provides early childhood programs serving over 200,000 children annually. According to Tami Ruckman, director of development, the YWCA of Asheville is dedicated to bridging the health gap for minority women. They offer low-income families access to their gym and pool facilities and even personal training, year-round. With such a robust physical activity program in place, their next step was to begin work to improve nutrition for the families they serve. “We decided we wanted them to eat healthier,” she recounts.

Ruckman consulted with the nearby Mountain Area Child and Family Center (MACFC), to implement their *Rainbow in My Tummy*® obesity prevention program. “They have developed a curriculum with a consulting process. They came in and taught us how to do away with the cans and boxes. It’s a complete local produce, local food, healthy eating program for kids,” she describes.

Implementation of *Rainbow in My Tummy*® required an overhaul of the existing meal program. MACFC brought in a team to walk through the kitchen and conduct an assessment of equipment and training needs. The YWCA received grant funding to help purchase new equipment, like a much-needed cooler. “We didn’t have a place to store produce, we only had freezers,” declares Ruckman. MACFC provided staff training and resources such as menus and recipes.

Labor hours were the biggest initial challenge. “The time was the hardest part. It takes a whole lot more time to cut up a bunch of carrots than to open a can,” warns Ruckman. “Our biggest investment was to go from two staff positions to four,” she recalls. After realizing present staffing levels were inadequate, they made room in their budget for two new part-time kitchen staff and converted an existing position to full-time to manage the kitchen and CACFP administrative requirements. Although the cost of the program is challenging to sustain, food costs have been manageable through creative sourcing like trips to the farmers market once or twice per week. And buy-in from students and parents was a breeze. “Parents love it, they just love it. They love that we’re thinking that way,” stresses Ruckman.

The change is stark. Meals like corn dogs and French fries have been replaced by spinach lasagna with spring mix salad. At breakfast, instead of biscuits with gravy, children will find homemade whole wheat banana muffins. And in the after-school program, a snack that was goldfish and juice has become tropical fruit salad with yogurt and coconut served with water.

Support from the MACFC and the commitment from the YWCA of Asheville has made all the difference. The *Rainbow in My Tummy*® program provided the framework to make this all possible and Ruckman is quick to give them credit for the success at YWCA. In a county where 16% of low-income 2- to 4-year-old children are obese, Ruckman explains that the obesity rate at MACFC is less than 1%.

However, without the support of the entire organization at the YWCA, change would not have been possible. “It was a struggle at first, but it’s still an ongoing thing. We are certainly committed to it, end of story, the agency committed to it. We’ve decided we are going to stick with it, because it’s the right thing.”