

## **A Coordinated Approach to Child Health: Preventing Childhood Obesity in Missoula County, Montana**

### **BACKGROUND**

In 2002, after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported rising obesity rates in the nation's youth, Missoula County, Montana, looked for an intervention to improve the lives of children in the community. After research into effective programs for obesity prevention, the city-county health department chose CATCH, a Coordinated Approach to Child Health. In 2010, a community health needs assessment in Missoula County identified childhood obesity as one of the major priorities for the community's health improvement plan. Based on this finding, Providence St. Patrick Hospital continued its investment in the CATCH curriculum as an obesity prevention measure, with the mission to expand partnerships, provide resources and invest long term for program sustainability.

### **INTERVENTIONS**

CATCH is a school-based program that targets individual behavior change, school environment, classroom and physical education curricula, food services, and family reinforcement. The program aims to increase the amount of moderate to vigorous physical activity that a child engages in each day. CATCH also enables students to identify healthy food choices via the program's "Go, Slow, and Whoa!" food model, which assigns foods to categories based on their nutritional content. The CATCH program in Missoula was originally funded by the CDC.

After a successful two-year pilot, Providence St. Patrick Hospital, the Missoula City-County Health Department, and the school district decided to continue the initiative. The hospital funded a part-time registered dietitian and community health specialist to implement the program more broadly by providing on-site training for school administration, all teachers and food service staff. Along with the CATCH training, each school campus received classroom, food service and physical education curricula and ongoing support, which included annual booster trainings, CATCH health fairs, classroom co-instructors, and cafeteria visits by Hearty Heart, the CATCH program mascot. Providence St. Patrick Hospital's CATCH staff expanded the program to school lunches, to phase out unhealthy ingredients and introduce healthier alternatives, including salad bars and new fruits.

Continued program investment helped expand the program into other community initiatives, such as Let's Move! Missoula, Graduation Matters Missoula, and Restoring Our Spirit with the Missoula Urban Indian Center. Today, the program employs a community health specialist called the community CATCH champion. The champion works with schools and agencies to formulate a plan for teaching physical education and classroom curricula, enhances menus, organizes family events and guides wellness committees. The CATCH champion also cultivates relationships with community partners and offers CATCH support and consulting to other hospitals.

Providence St. Patrick partners with the Missoula Parks and Recreation department to provide annual staff training, curriculum and healthy snacks, to complement lessons by instructors who co-teach weekly with camp leaders. The CATCH camps include blindfold taste-testing of new and unusual foods, and games like Dragon's Tail. In Dragon's Tail, children dodge one another to protect their tail (scarf)

from being pulled. When their tail is pulled, they must do five jumping jacks while naming their favorite "Go" foods to re-enter the game. CATCH staff members introduce new activities each season, and children vote on their favorite games.

Missoula Food Bank embraces CATCH by providing a fun learning environment for children while their parents visit the food bank. Providence St. Patrick Hospital co-sponsors a child wellness area, including "Go, Slow, and Whoa!" posters, CATCH coloring books, crossword puzzles and other fun, nutrition-based activity sheets. All visitors, including children, can learn about nutrition and have fun.

The Missoula Family YMCA has embraced CATCH in its preschools and after-school programs. Over the past 10 years, YMCA staff members have attended local CATCH trainings hosted by national CATCH trainers and received booster trainings by the Missoula CATCH staff. Currently, the program is embedded in four YMCA preschools and their after-school programs. Each year, CATCH hosts an interactive booth at the YMCA during the annual Healthy Kids Day event to support the family and home connection. Curriculum and trainings continue to be sponsored by Providence St. Patrick Hospital.

In 2010, Providence St. Patrick Hospital co-sponsored the Go Grow Grocery exhibit at Children's Museum Missoula. This exhibit teaches kids how to make healthy food choices while shopping, and CATCH posters offer guidance on how to categorize foods as "Go, Slow, and Whoa" for the children's mock-shopping experience. CATCH staff taught lessons to children and their families in the grocery store once a month during the first year to help kick-start the exhibit, and the hospital donated a CATCH curriculum to help sustain the program.

In 2016, Providence St. Patrick Hospital hosts its 12th annual Health CATCH Health Fair. Third- and fourth- graders from schools around Missoula County participate at fun, health-related educational stations. The health fair gives more than 700 children a hands-on, group learning session to practice and learn about healthy lifestyles, including how the circulatory system works and how nutrition, exercise and tobacco affect the heart and blood vessels. Children also learn how to protect their brains with a helmet and the importance of washing hands to prevent spreading germs. The program is now supported by a larger, communitywide effort, Let's Move! Missoula (LM!M), housed at the Missoula City-County Health Department. St. Patrick Hospital's CATCH program is one of the LM!M partnering agencies that meets regularly to outline a plan to change the culture of physical activity and health in Missoula County.

In 2007, the Providence St. Patrick Hospital CATCH program was recognized by Providence Health & Services with the Mission Leadership Award, which rewards efforts to help underserved or vulnerable populations in the community.

## **RESULTS**

After piloting CATCH for two years, community partners confirmed through knowledge-based pre- and post-testing that CATCH was making a difference in how children were eating and thinking about food and physical activity. Test results demonstrated student activity level during P.E. classes increased by

20 percent, and third-grade students showed a 31 percent increase in knowledge about how to eat a healthy diet. CATCH helped area teachers add lessons about nutrition and healthy lifestyles to their daily lesson plans. Providence St. Patrick Hospital, the Missoula City-County Health Department, and the school district recognized the importance of continuing the initiative.

After an expansion to school lunch programs, CATCH staff surveyed kids on what kinds of fruits and vegetables they liked most. Salad bars were stocked with children's choice produce, and kitchen staff discovered that children do like to eat foods like broccoli and spinach. The number of children reporting they eat fruit daily increased by 38 percent.

The curriculum is now woven into the Missoula County Community Health Improvement Plan and is truly a communitywide program. "Go, Slow, and Whoa!" messaging can be found on school menus, cafeterias, pediatricians' offices, Parks and Recreation camps, the YMCA, local food bank and local children's museum. Given Providence's dedication to preventive care and community wellness, the hospital's effort to unite many different players in the community behind a common goal of wellness has been regarded as a great success.

"The CATCH program lessons have been taught in Missoula Parks and Recreation's Kids in Action summer youth day camps for almost 10 seasons now," said Ryan Yearous, recreation specialist for the Missoula Parks and Recreation department. "Our campers talk about their lunches and snacks using the "Go, Slow, Whoa!" descriptions with their peers and our staff. CATCH presence in our camps has encouraged our staff to make better choices and become role models for the campers."

Providence St. Patrick Hospital has guided 10 school districts with CATCH implementation by hosting national CATCH trainings, purchasing curricula, offering expert staff and hosting a free annual health fair. "This program really made the children aware of many health issues," said one third-grade teacher. "I noticed students making more healthy choices for snacks, even when they would bring treats for their birthday."

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

To share success stories, CATCH staff circulated a monthly newsletter, which later expanded and welcomed nationwide networking. Identifying dedicated hospital staff and champions to coordinate and spread the CATCH program has been critical to the program's success. Partnering with a broad range of stakeholders has bolstered support for the program and furthered success by building multiple touchpoints in the community.

## **CONTACT**

Lisa Tims

Missoula CATCH Program Coordinator, Providence St. Patrick Hospital  
Senior Community Health Specialist, Missoula City-County Health Department  
(406) 329-5759

[lisa.tims@providence.org](mailto:lisa.tims@providence.org)