Encouraging children to eat healthier foods from an early age can be critical to fighting childhood obesity and other serious health problems linked to diet. West Virginia is one of four states that has seen its childhood obesity rate climb in recent years, partly because its children fail to get enough fruits and vegetables. Children with limited income are at the greatest risk of becoming overweight or obese because their families often lack easy access to healthy food. The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program is working with organizers of the Keys for Healthy Kids, Keys to a Healthy Start initiative to help establish pop-up farmers markets at child care centers throughout the state. The aim is to increase the consumption of vegetables and fruits using pop-up markets and a voucher program, offering students the opportunity to purchase fruits and vegetables and bring them home to be consumed. These pop-up markets give each student at the center an opportunity to “shop” for fruits and vegetables that they may have never seen or tasted. It also helps to develop a taste for nutritious food that can last a lifetime.

The Challenge

West Virginia has an adult obesity rate of 35.6 percent, the second highest in the nation. But obesity also is a problem among the state’s young and poor: about 14 percent of low-income children ages two to four are considered obese. The condition puts individuals at greater risk for additional health problems, including heart disease, stroke and diabetes. In addition to regular physical activity, a healthy diet can play a significant role in preventing children from becoming overweight or obese.

“Bringing the market to the child care center not only offers easier access for parents, but is also an opportunity to help young children connect with where their food comes from and build healthy preferences”
— Kristin McCartney, public health specialist and SNAP-Ed coordinator for West Virginia University Extension

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The ANCHOR Partnerships Program partnered with the West Virginia University Extension Service and the nonprofit organization, KEYS 4 Healthy Kids, to improve the health environment at childcare centers. Local farmers markets as well as Community Supported Agriculture boxes are being set up at childcare locations that have a large proportion of families who receive benefits through SNAP, which is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program formerly known as food stamps. The market program lets children explore the tastes of the healthy fruits and vegetables offered through the pop-up farm stands. Additionally, the initiative works with parents to ensure they know that SNAP benefits can be used at most farmers markets in the area.

**Sustaining Success**

The American Heart Association’s ANCHOR program continues to recruit additional farmers markets and childcare centers to participate in the pop-up initiative. At the same time, it is working to educate the parents about the program so that children will be encouraged to bring home favorite fruits and vegetables — or try completely new ones. Such efforts could lead families to make farmers market shopping a regular habit.

**Policy, System and Environmental Change**

This initiative is helping child care centers implement a nutrition-based curriculum that also allows young children to understand where food comes from. It also provides children the opportunity to increase their vegetable and fruit consumption and allows them to take home the food purchased to their parents who might not necessarily have the access or the resources to purchase the food otherwise.

**Results**

Children are being exposed to tasty, nutritious food at an early age thanks to pop-up farmers markets set up at their child care centers. Inside the classroom, children are learning about different types of produce. Outside of it, those lessons are reinforced through their interaction with farmers and the use of vouchers that let them sample some of the food. “We were thankful to work with the AHA ANCHOR program, which allowed us to bring farmers’ markets to the child care centers so children could see all the fruits and vegetables that farmers provide and ‘shop’ for different foods to take home,” said Jessica Dianellos, coordinator for the Key 2 a Healthy Start program.

The initiative is proving beneficial to busy families with limited shopping options. “Bringing the market to the child care center not only offers easier access for parents, but is also an opportunity to help young children connect with where their food comes from and build healthy preferences,” said Kristin McCartney, public health specialist and SNAP-Ed coordinator for West Virginia University Extension.

**Get Involved**

West Virginia farmers and child care centers interested in joining the effort to educate children and young families about the benefits of buying fresh, local produce should contact the American Heart Association at [https://www.heart.org/anchorwv](https://www.heart.org/anchorwv) to learn more. Outside of the region, support farmers markets in your neighborhood, and raise awareness about efforts to help underserved neighborhoods that have limited access to grocery stores.