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The Right Bite: How Arkansans are Eating Healthier

*The second in a series exploring
issues from ARCF's
Aspire Arkansas report.*



The Chambless family of Dewitt is taking steps to eat healthier.

Healthy Eating Is a Family Affair

by Kimberly Dishongh

Seven-year-old Reece Chambless of Dewitt regularly takes it upon himself to remind his father that candy isn't the best choice for him.

"He is always talking about that, for sure," said his dad, Brad Chambless. He knows his son is right and he tries to comply, although he suspects Reece might just want the gummy bears for himself.

Reece's parents have always tried to keep the sugar in his diet low, even while indulging themselves, but these days sweets – other than gummy bears – are a rarity in their house. "If it's here, I'll probably want it," said his mother, Jay Chambless, "so we just don't keep it here."

Reece started paying closer attention to everyone's nutritional needs last year when he learned about how nutrition affects the body through a program at his school called OrganWise Guys, provided by the United States Department of Agriculture nutrition

education programs and the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture's Cooperative Extension Service.

OrganWise Guys uses characters like Hardy Heart, Peri Stolic and Sir Rebrum to teach children – and, indirectly, their parents – to make good health, nutrition and lifestyle choices.

Ana Hollis, Arkansas County Extension agent, gets those lessons out to the public by putting posters and displays about best food choices in grocery stores, Department of Human Services offices and food pantries. She also demonstrates recipes at farmer's markets and distributes information at commodities handouts.

Making the Switch

Reece has been one catalyst in his family's move toward healthier eating in the last year and a half. His mom, however, is the one who took charge of the grocery list and started buying healthier foods.

Heart disease runs in her family, she explained, and she hopes this will help stave off potential problems. "My daddy actually died of a heart attack in 2006," she said.

Heart disease is often linked to obesity, but Chambless's father was slender, just as she is, so she knows it's not enough just to maintain a healthy weight.

In the beginning, she didn't tell her family what was afoot. "The first time I did it, I sneaked the packages in so they wouldn't know," she laughed. "I just wanted to see how they would respond to it. I used ground turkey and whole wheat pasta and I just thought, 'Oh, they're not going to eat this.' I thought they wouldn't touch it at all."

No one complained – she wasn't sure they even noticed – so she kept at it, replacing pork bacon with lower-fat turkey bacon, and making peanut butter sandwiches with low-sugar or sugar-free jellies and jams. She also cut out most processed foods and started serving more fresh or frozen vegetables, and fewer high-sodium canned ones, and added fruits and high protein Greek yogurt where she could.

"It's amazing, even with my husband – he loves to eat," she said. "He's been doing better with this and he's losing weight." Brad Chambless has lost 25 pounds in the last year. "I used to weigh probably 285 pounds and just did not feel good. If you put it in front of me, I would eat it, and that is not a healthy way to go," he said. "I had to have my knee replaced and I thought, 'You better get back down below 260, and you've got to keep it there to heal, rehab and just feel better.' We started cooking different, eating smaller. It was a way of life or a way of thinking that I would want to have fried chicken or fried fish. Now we grill just about everything, year round."

Cooking as a Family

On a recent day, Jay Chambless recruited Reece and his younger brother, 3-year-old Jackson, to help prepare their lunch – chicken pizza. She sautéed sliced chicken tenders in olive oil and softened whole wheat tortillas before sliding them onto baking sheets and calling in the boys. Reece used the back of a spoon to spread pizza sauce around his tortilla, and after Chambless helped



"It helps to get all the food groups in — that's what we try to do."

— Jay Chambless





Jackson with that part of the process, both boys tossed on handfuls of chicken and sprinkled mozzarella on top.

"If my husband was here I would do mushrooms, tomatoes and maybe bell peppers, but my kids won't eat those," Chambless said. Reece and Jackson drank water – there's no soda in the Chambless house – with their lunch, and then eagerly awaited dessert.

Their popsicles were the kind to be doled out with no maternal guilt. Chambless had prepared them ahead of time, popping strawberries and plain Greek yogurt in the blender and then pouring that naturally-sweet concoction into a popsicle mold she picked up at the dollar store. She sometimes uses other fruits, and she sometimes adds a cup of fresh spinach for a real health kick. "It helps to get all the food groups in – that's what we try to do," Chambless said. "I put them in the freezer – my kids love them. And I like them, too, especially with the spinach. They just make me feel good."

Investing in Nutrition

Chambless, director of the Pattillo Center School in Dewitt, said the hardest part of feeding her family healthier foods is finding them in the first place. Produce is plentiful in the two grocery stores in her town, unlike in some areas. But items like low-sugar or no-sugar-added products and Greek yogurt rarely find their ways to the shelves there so she has to pick those up when she's out of town.

Eating healthier, she said, has also put a bigger dent in the family's budget. "We can do it, but I'm not sure people with less money could," she said. Fortunately, the Extension Services offers programs on couponing and eating right on a budget. Brad Chambless, a lawyer turned banker with Farmers and Merchants Bank in Dewitt, considers the extra cost to be a good investment.

"It's a mindset," he said. "If we continue down the path that we were brought up on and never change to try to make ourselves better, our kids are learning every day from what we're doing. If we're not making it better, we're making it worse on them – exponentially. So the path that we've kind of chosen to take, I'm really proud of, that Jay's done it and that the boys are following in there. Right now it seems like we've got a good foothold on them and we've got a good program started so they are thinking better about their eating habits."



2,000 - 2,500 — the average number of calories per day needed by (most) adult males to maintain a healthy weight.

1,500 - 2,000 — the average number of calories per day needed by (most) adult females to maintain a healthy weight.

Source: Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention



Visit www.arcf.org for more photos and healthy eating resources.

Partnership Brings the Farm to School

To break the French fries and pizza habit, kids need repeated exposure to healthy food options. In Fayetteville, an exciting partnership between the public school district and Apple Seeds, Inc. (a local nonprofit organization) is helping to provide the exposure, education and excitement to help kids learn to love healthy foods. It starts in the cafeteria. Under the leadership of Child Nutrition Director Adam Simmons, about 30 percent of the Fayetteville Public Schools (FPS) meal budget is spent on local milk, bread and produce, significantly more than the 12 percent national average.

"Many school cafeterias just warm and serve. They don't even have the equipment to prepare fresh ingredients," noted Simmons. "Luckily, here in Fayetteville, all of our kitchens are equipped for full production." Ideally, Simmons said, he'd like to eliminate all processed foods from FPS school lunches. But cost constraints and seasonal limitations on fresh, local produce are his biggest challenges. Simmons works around these challenges by buying local when fresh foods are in season and teaching cafeteria personnel to prepare foods from scratch.

The work Simmons is doing in the district's lunch rooms is augmented by engaging extracurricular programs offered by Apple Seeds, Inc., a volunteer group partnering with FPS to teach kids about healthy eating and broaden their palates to appreciate fresh, nutrient-rich foods. Through Apple Seeds, elementary students take field trips to local farms to learn about how food is produced and participate in after-school gardening clubs where they learn how to grow and prepare healthy snacks. Apple Seeds has also worked with Fayetteville Schools to host popular community-wide cooking classes. "We're taking kids to meet the farmers," explained Apple Seeds Director Beth Ashbaugh. "They buy food at the farmers' market. Then, we sample it and talk about what we are eating and the farmer who grew it. We're making the connection back to where food comes from."

Pre- and post-surveys indicate that children who participate in Apple Seeds' after-school gardening clubs are more willing to try fruits and vegetables and more likely to choose fruits and vegetables as snacks after completing the program. Working in tandem, the school district and Apple Seeds are creating a positive, peer-based environment where children are exposed to and encouraged to try new foods. "I went into this thinking I was going to have to get up on a soapbox and beg the kids to 'Just try one bite.' But I've never had to do that," said Ashbaugh. "Sometimes we have kids begging us to give them seconds and thirds on kale or cucumbers!"



Fayetteville Public Schools students dine on fresh, locally grown foods at a farm-to-school lunch day earlier this year.

A Farm-to-School Menu

During the 2011-2012 school year, Apple Seeds and Fayetteville Public Schools partnered with Chicken Moon Farm and Energy Corps to host farm-to-school lunch days at each elementary school in the district. Students were served an entire meal of locally grown, freshly prepared dishes. Students at Root Elementary School dined on:

- Herb-roasted chicken from Little Portion Farm in Eureka Springs
- Lightly sautéed snap peas from Brannon Mountain Farm in Crosses
- Spinach and lettuce salad from Charlie's Vegetables in Farmington
- Strawberry shortcake featuring strawberries from Dickey Farms in Springdale

"The kids were so excited about their school lunch that day," said Apple Seeds Director Beth Ashbaugh. "They told us over and over, 'If the school served lunch like this every day, I would eat it!'"



Visit www.arcf.org for more more resources on the Farm to School movement.

How Does Your Garden Grow?

Community Gardening Advice from
Lake Village's Delta Sprouts Program

About seven years ago, folks in Lake Village started talking about one of their agricultural community's great ironies: though they were surrounded by acres and acres of commodity crops, almost no one grew their own food. Small patch farming was all but nonexistent. From those initial conversations grew the Delta Sprouts.

The program, supported by Heifer International, included initiatives to teach residents to raise their own livestock and to establish a farmer's market and community garden. It took about three-and-a-half years to go from imagining a community garden to harvesting their first crop, but today, the Delta Sprouts' thriving garden is a model of community engagement and has re-energized backyard farmers across Lake Village. We spoke to Amber Bunker, president of the Delta Sprouts, to get her advice on planting a successful community garden.



1. Start with small raised beds. Although ground plots take less start-up time, Bunker recommends raised beds, constructed with wood or cement landscape pavers. They make weed control easier, put less strain on gardeners' backs and can be spaced apart for wheelchair accessibility. And when building beds, don't bite off more than you can chew. "You get plenty of food out of a 4' by 12' plot," says Bunker. Although it's exciting to picture spacious beds filled with leafy greens, large plots can be overwhelming for inexperienced gardeners.

2. Provide resources to make it easy for gardeners. The time and effort you invest in infrastructure pays off in community engagement. Gardeners are more likely to stay invested in the project if it's easy to stop by and maintain their crops. The Delta Sprouts' garden provides individual water faucets (split from a single water line) for each bed and tools and compost for communal use.

3. Enlist local experts. Cooperative Extension agents and Master Gardeners are founts of horticultural knowledge and have access to resources like soil testing kits, planting calendars and educational events. As your garden grows, enlist these local experts for support. Soon, as community gardeners gain experience, they'll be able to pass along their knowledge to new participants.

4. Build buy-in with individual plots. Although it's not a bad idea to have some plots for communal crops, Bunker recommends prioritizing plots for individual use. The Delta Sprouts' individual plots are reserved on a seasonal basis, allowing new gardeners to rotate in and existing gardeners to rest occasionally. For communal beds, Bunker recommends giving away at least some of the produce to local families in need. "That purpose drives people to continue to show up."

5. Be the candle for your community. An unintended consequence of the Delta Sprouts' success has been an increase in backyard gardens across town. "The number of people gardening has gone up dramatically in this area, and the local seed supplier says plant sales have gone up dramatically." Bunker's advice? Build your garden with the intent to be a "candle" for the community, inspiring neighbors to take up home gardening. "When you garden, you start making healthier choices. Once you start eating out of a garden, food from a can isn't the same."

Visit www.arcf.org for more information about community gardening in Arkansas.

Help Stop Hunger in Arkansas

by Kim Evans

925 million people worldwide do not have enough to eat. In Arkansas, 1 in 6 people live below the poverty line and struggle to provide adequate nutrition for their families. Poor nutrition is one of those challenges that can seem insurmountable. But progress IS happening!

Organizations right here in Arkansas are working to expand the number of feeding sites available to children during the summer, help eligible families enroll to receive government food assistance, create mobile food pantries to bring food to people who lack transportation, teach people to cook healthy meals with cheap, easily accessible food items, promote backyard gardening, teach canning and preserving and more!

Progress is possible, and you can help make it happen. Here's how:

- Find resources in your community. If you don't know what programs are available in your town, you can't fully understand the need. Find out who's working to address hunger, obesity and poor nutrition in your community. If there's an unmet need, could you partner with other concerned citizens to help gather resources to fill the gap?
- Support innovation. The organizations working on the front lines of these issues need support to try out new strategies. Could your charitable dollars provide the startup funding to help a local group pilot a new project?
- Endow your local food pantry. Feeding programs can't operate without funding to keep the lights on and pay staff. You can establish an endowment through Arkansas Community Foundation to provide a permanent source of funding to support the daily operating expenses for a local food pantry.
- Support our Giving Tree program. When you support ARCF's Giving Tree endowments, you enable us to make grants to hundreds of local nonprofit organizations each year. Your charitable dollar never stretched so far!

Arkansas Community Foundation can help you get connected to the causes you care about and use your resources to build your community through philanthropy. Contact Vice President Kim Evans to learn more about your philanthropic options, kevans@arcf.org or **501-372-1116**.



18.6% of Arkansans experience "food insecurity," meaning they don't always know where their next meal will come from.

Source: Feeding America



Harold McGahee exhibits his locally-grown tomatoes at the Main Street Helena Farmers' Market.

Farmers' Markets Break Down Barriers to Healthy Food

It's 9:00 on a summer Saturday morning in Helena-West Helena. Under the farmers' market pavilion, a kaleidoscope of fresh fruits and vegetables gleams appetizingly from vendor booths – fat pink tomatoes, eggplants of all shapes and sizes, purple hull peas, ears of corn, new potatoes, green beans and jars of jams and preserves begging to be sampled.

Traditionally the Main Street Helena Farmers' Market has been a cash-only enterprise, but starting this summer, a new electronic payment system will make these nutritious fruits and veggies accessible to shoppers who receive government assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

This new shopping outlet provides much needed access for low-income residents of the downtown area. "The closest grocery store is two miles from Court Square," explained Julia Nordsieck, president of the Main Street Helena board of directors. "For people who don't have transportation, the only access to food is at the gas stations, which serve fried chicken, soda pop and other less healthy options. We see accepting SNAP benefits as a great way to break down some of those barriers to fresh healthy food."

The payment system, purchased with support from a grant from Arkansas Community Foundation, enables SNAP recipients to swipe their EBT (electronic bank transfer) cards to buy farmers' market tokens. These tokens can be used like cash to purchase produce

from farmers' market vendors, who cash them out with the market director at the end of the day.

It's a win-win-win situation. SNAP recipients are able to purchase fresh, healthy foods using benefits for which they've already qualified. Farmers' market vendors expand their customer base, and the community benefits from a thriving farmers' market and increased availability of locally grown produce.

"We want to make the market a viable source of income for our farmers," said Nordsieck. The Main Street Helena Farmers' Market opened about five years ago with just a handful of produce vendors, but has grown to about 10. "One of the things farmers have really connected with is that we are accepting SNAP. There's a possibility to make good sales there, but it's also a way for them to give back, and they're excited about that."

As the farmers' market grows and attracts more customers, it's supporting a resurgence in vegetable farming. Vendors like Harold McGahee, who's been farming in the area for more than 60 years, exhibit their wares alongside newcomers like Pat Wilhelm, an organic gardener who travels in from Marianna.

Across the state, a growing number of farmers' markets have begun to accept SNAP benefits. Heather Friedrich, a professor in the department of horticulture at the University of Arkansas, has worked with a cooperative of nine farmers' markets in Northwest Arkansas to implement EBT systems, funded through a USDA Farmers' Market Promotion Program grant. Friedrich noted that participation in the program has been especially strong in larger communities like Fayetteville and Bentonville.

Outreach work has been key in encouraging SNAP recipients to visit the farmers markets. "We created brochures and flyers and took them to Head Start programs, libraries, food pantries and other public spaces. We also created a website," Friedrich said. As the Main Street Helena Farmers' Market's EBT system get up and running, the organization is planning similar outreach efforts in their area.

"It's one piece of the larger picture that we can do to help fight obesity and end food deserts," said Friedrich. We've got to do whatever we can do to increase access for lower income people and everyone in general – everybody needs access to fruits and vegetables."



Visit www.arcf.org to see video of the Main Street Helena Farmers' Market and for information on other Arkansas farmers' markets that accept SNAP benefits.

What can your community do to improve nutrition for families in Arkansas?



By Anna Strong
*Healthy Policy Director
Arkansas Advocates for
Children and Families*

With a child poverty rate of 26.8 percent, children and families in Arkansas can often face barriers to accessing healthy, nutritious food. Additionally, rural or impoverished communities have areas called “food deserts” where fresh, non-packaged foods aren’t locally available.

When it comes to kids, it’s especially important that children have a healthy start in life that includes good nutrition. Many children get more than half their calories each day at school through school breakfast, lunch and after-school programs. In the 2010-2011 school year, almost 300,000 children were part of the free and reduced lunch program in Arkansas. Community members can encourage local school districts to adopt policies that make sure school meals will help children grow up healthy. A recent Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Pew Health Group report measured the impact of changing school snack and a la carte food and beverage policies. Strong food and beverage policies will reduce access to, purchase of and consumption of unhealthy items *and* increase the purchase of healthy foods — without impacting school revenues. Other benefits of improved school policies include reduction in health risks such as tooth decay and obesity and benefits to vulnerable minority or low-income families.

School-based health programs can also help. A school’s wellness committee can have a big impact on a school nutrition by encouraging health and nutrition education, applying for Fresh Fruits and Veggies grants, or encouraging school gardens. Community members can work closely with their school district to develop a culture of health for schools and families.



By Kathy Webb
*Executive Director
Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance*

Proper nutrition plays a vital role in overall human development. A healthy lifestyle can affect everything from how well our children can focus in school to how productive our workforce is. There are several ways that we can work together to ensure that families in Arkansas are receiving the proper nutrition that will help them grow and thrive:

1. **Community Gardens:** community gardens produce nutritious food, reduce family food budgets, and conserve resources. Additional benefits include opportunities for recreation and exercise and social interaction with neighbors.
2. **Gleaning:** the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance works with farmers across Arkansas to glean fields after the first harvest. One million pounds of fresh produce is expected to be available to low income Arkansans through the Alliance’s network of food banks. Recipes are available to recipients who might not be familiar with the fruit or vegetable.
3. **Shopping Matters/Cooking Matters:** the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance works with communities through two programs called Shopping Matters and Cooking Matters to teach families how to shop for and prepare low-cost, easy to prepare and nutritious meals. By participating in these programs, we can help improve the nutrition, and the lives, of Arkansans.

ARKANSAS VIEWPOINTS



In 2011, less than 15% of Arkansas’s high school students reported eating vegetables three or more times daily.
Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System

Weighing In on Obesity and Poverty

Why is it that communities that struggle with poverty also frequently struggle with obesity? It's counterintuitive that the citizens most likely to face hunger and food insecurity might also struggle with their weight. The poverty-obesity link suggests that the problem isn't just access to calories; it's access to the right kind of calories – healthy, nutrient-rich foods that nourish the body rather than just filling it up.

In Arkansas Community Foundation's *Aspire Arkansas* report, released last May, we identified seven goals for Arkansas's communities and looked for data that shows how each of our communities are faring with regard to each goal. Below are several maps from the report that address poverty and obesity.

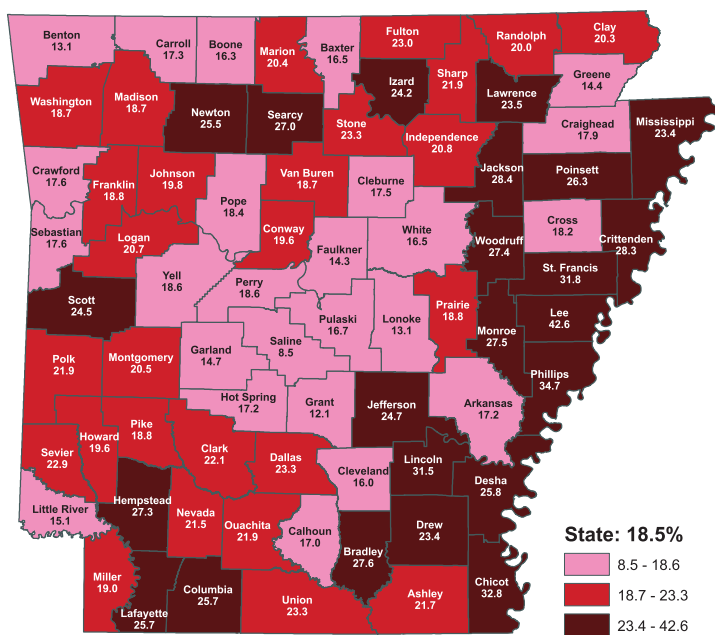
Use these maps to help compare your county to others across your region and the whole state so you can start the conversation in your community about how to move the numbers in the right direction.

For additional data on health and poverty and historical trends for your county, visit
www.arcf.org/AspireArkansas.



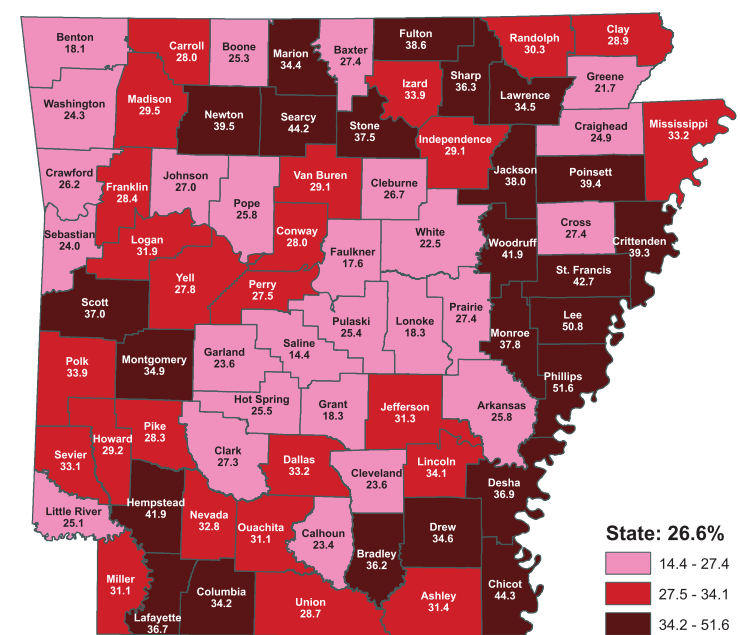
poverty

Percent of Population Living in Poverty, by County: 2009



children in POVERTY

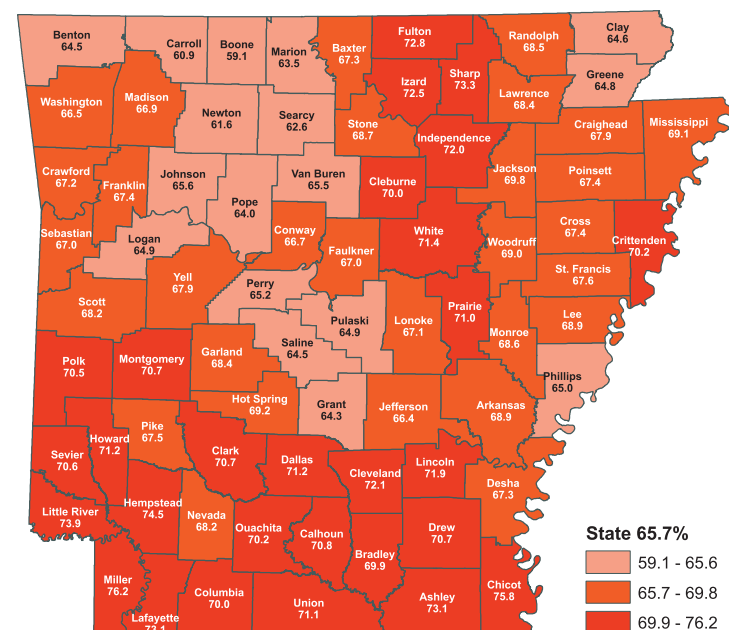
Percent of Population Under 18 Years of Age Living in Poverty, by County: 2009



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates. Release Date: December 2010

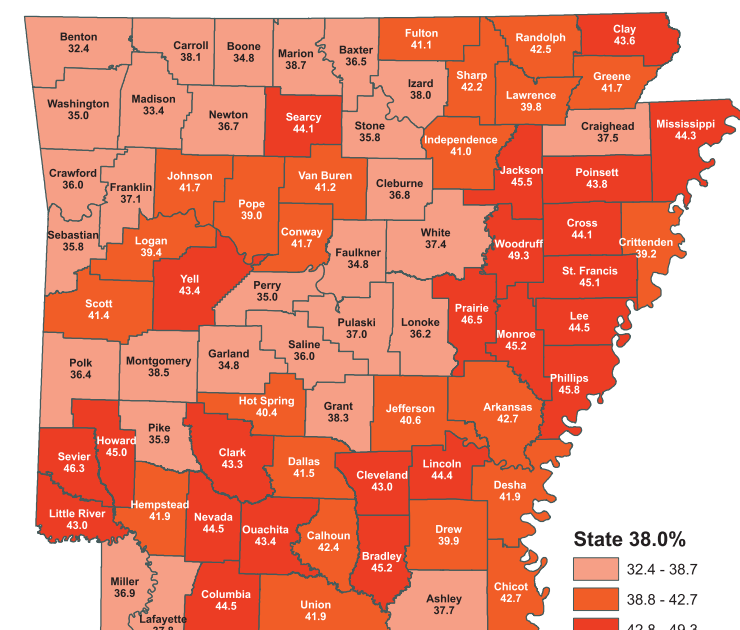
adult OBESITY

Percent of Overweight and Obese Adults, by County: 2008



overweight STUDENTS

Percent of Overweight or Obese Students, by County: 2009-2010
(grades K, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10)



Source: Arkansas Center for Health Improvement, Assessment of Childhood and Adolescent Obesity in Arkansas: Statewide Results (Year 7)



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People Will Be Healthy

Arkansas Community Foundation's Aspire Arkansas report released in 2011 provides county-by-county data on seven aspirations for our state, one of which is, "People will be healthy." In this issue of *ENGAGE* magazine, we examine programs that are working in Arkansas to help families eat better.

I was fortunate to grow up in a family that grew vegetables in a small garden

at home. Eating fresh healthy produce — and having a few extras to share with friends — is a benefit that I have taken for granted. And now that I do my own gardening, I also find that planting, watering, fertilizing, weeding and watching my garden grow give me an added bonus — a boost in mental as well as physical health. It is just plain fun to see that first tomato blush from green to red.

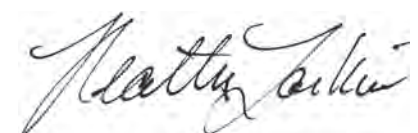
Making small changes that add up to a better way of eating isn't easy. In mid-July, I opened my morning newspaper to read a story that Arkansas is ranked 48th in the nation in a 2011 healthcare report issued by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The previous year, our state

was ranked 36th, which means our ranking declined significantly in just one year.

We need to reverse that trend, and good eating is a major contributor to good health.

In this issue of *ENGAGE*, we bring you the story of a DeWitt family learning to eat healthier (**Page 1**) and a program in Fayetteville to put more fresh, local food in school lunch rooms (**Page 4**). Learn how to establish a successful community garden on **Page 5**, and learn how a farmers' market in Helena is expanding access to fresh produce for low-income families on **Page 7**.

Arkansas Community Foundation strives to engage people, connect resources and inspire solutions to build community. We hope this issue of *ENGAGE* will start a conversation within your community about new ways to help Arkansas families improve their eating habits.


ARCF President and CEO

