

2020 Wrap Up: COVID Edition



Greetings from the ONAPA crew: Rita | Katharine | Siobhan | Kori

What a whirlwind this past year has been! Despite the inherent challenges of working with schools and community partners during a pandemic, HKHC coordinators have leaned on their creativity and resourcefulness to make incredible things happen across our state. We have a lot of positive news to share, so take a break from your day and check it out!

While COVID may have stopped some of our work dead in its tracks, it sure didn't stop us from highlighting our local heroes, diving deep into social media to share resources and promote healthy lifestyle behaviors, reaching children and families at home, or getting in touch with the times through virtual implementation of work previously thought to be accomplished via "boots on the ground" only. It also paved the way for new opportunities to advance state, regional, and school-level policy, expand gardens, partner with ECE sites, and apply for funding to support trail work and infrastructure projects.



R: Farmington food service staff load up 7-day meal boxes for families

Harvesting & preparing meals using produce from Zuni's Ho'n A:Wan community garden



L: Dexter food service staff add fresh produce to school meals



R: Fall Fling at Lake Arthur's new school/community garden



Current & Upcoming (Virtual) Events!

2021 Legislative Session: January 19th – March 20th

This year, we're looking at a virtual 60-day session. For our team here at DOH, this means being on-call to analyze bills at a moment's notice. For our community partners, this is an opportunity to educate and inform our policymakers about obesity prevention efforts and successes at the local level - while operating in a pandemic no less!

NM Grown Buyer/Grower Meeting: February 3rd



A virtual statewide training and networking opportunity for growers, support organizations, state agencies, and buyers from schools, early care & education (ECE) sites, and senior centers to prepare and plan for the 2021-22 growing season. Please share with your partners! Register [here](#) by February 1st.

March is National Nutrition Month

Celebrated every March, National Nutrition Month focuses on the importance of making informed food choices and cultivating sound eating and physical activity habits. Check out the [website](#) to learn how you can help spread the word!



Rural Child Hunger Summit: March 23rd and 24th

Hosted by [No Kid Hungry](#), this free event highlights disparities driving child hunger in rural communities, identifies promising practices that amplify the impact of nutrition programs and help reduce child hunger, and celebrates community and evidence-informed innovations. We'll share registration details as they become available.

NM Grown Institute: April 20th - 22nd

Details forthcoming about this exciting free virtual learning opportunity and networking event organized by the NM Public Education Department!



Adapting to a Virtual World

We held our first ever virtual statewide training in July, back when the world of virtual meetings was still unfamiliar territory for many of us. Though nothing can replace gathering together in person, our team was impressed by the high level of engagement and rich conversation among our coordinators and partners. Topics were centered on acknowledging our challenges and identifying strategies for working with schools and ECE sites operating in a hybrid – or strictly virtual – model this year. We discussed how to implement farm to school and NM Grown initiatives, support food service staff, and elevate our communication and social media efforts to increase awareness, share resources, and reach families in their home environments. We also began a dialogue around health equity and explored various ways we might collectively shape or go beyond our current work to better address health inequities in our state.



HKHC Takes to Social Media



The COVID-19 pandemic has opened up new opportunities and ways of doing business that encourage creativity, adaptability, and exploration. It has also allowed more space to focus on critical aspects of our work that may have been sidelined in the past due to so many competing priorities.

Over the past nine months, we've really focused our collective energy on state and local communication efforts. With strong guidance from Deborah Busemeyer, HKHC Communications Consultant, each coordinator drafted a comprehensive communication plan with concrete goals for increasing awareness, such as writing and disseminating local newsletters or reaching out to state representatives and senators.

Each coordinator also created a Facebook page to help spread the word about our obesity prevention work – they regularly share news, resources, recipes, and nutrition and physical activity tips in addition to recognizing community partners, promoting events like International Walk to School Day in October, and highlighting local parks, trails, farmers' markets, and businesses. As the pandemic changes and evolves, coordinators also post food distribution pick-up times and locations, school reopening updates, and COVID-safe practice reminders. This important piece of our work may not have grown so tremendously had we not been forced to take a pause and reflect on our priorities and areas for development.

Paula Camp and Becky Joyce, HKHC Chaves County coordinators, were the first to use this transitional downtime as an opportunity to highlight local partners, starting with Roswell school principals (check out the video they created in partnership with the district media department [here](#)). They then moved on to recognize PE teachers, school nurses, and food service staff from all four districts on their Facebook page. To add flair and variety to their posts, Becky used "Cartoon Face", an app that essentially turns the subject of a photo into a superhero!

Their partners have shared how much they enjoy the recognition and, when community members see photos of people they know, the news sure spreads like wildfire through everyone's social media networks. It didn't take long before other HKHC communities began to follow suit. During such a challenging year, we all deserve a little recognition for the work we do every day for our state, our communities, and our fellow New Mexicans!

Recognizing Local Heroes!



From L to R: Amy Ellis, Lake Arthur Elem PE teacher; Oscar Ochoterena, Sunset Elem PE teacher; Jennifer Youngblood, Mesa Mid School nurse. Did you know all three are also superheroes?



Recognizing Harvest Food Hub volunteers in San Juan County

James Elementary Teacher Nationally Recognized as 2020 Community Food Champion



This year, the National Farm to School Network (NFSN) approached their Farm to School Month celebrations with a theme of “It Takes a Community to Feed a Community.” A cornerstone of their campaign was to uplift farmers, teachers, school nutrition professionals, and many others going above and beyond to keep children and families connected to community food systems during the pandemic.

Patricia Cain, a dual language teacher at James Elementary in Portales, is one such individual. Nominated by Caron Powers, HKHC Roosevelt County coordinator, Cain joins 29 Community Food Champions selected by NFSN from a pool of over 200 nominees. Powers wanted to highlight Cain’s

exceptional leadership and dedication to keeping the James Elementary garden growing and thriving during an incredibly challenging year.

When the pandemic forced schools across NM to close in March, Cain recruited a team of volunteers to help her prepare, plant, and maintain all 24 raised beds throughout the spring and summer so produce would be growing when students came back in the fall. Although students have not been able to fully return for classes, Cain and her team harvested the produce, donated some to community members, and preserved the rest for future cooking and nutrition education opportunities when in-person instruction resumes.



Four years after its creation, the James Elementary garden has become a fixture in the school community, a flourishing space where students learn firsthand where their fruits and vegetables come from. Congratulations, Patricia Cain, and thank you for keeping a good thing growing!

Behind the Scenes

Meet Our New Epidemiologist/Evaluator!

After months of waiting, Kori VanDerGeest finally joined our team in September 2020! Kori grew up in Albuquerque and recently moved back to NM from Seattle, WA. She has a master’s degree in public health from the University of Washington, where she partnered with community-based organizations to conduct research on water contamination. Previously, she worked as a high school teacher in Gadsden School District in Doña Ana County. Kori enjoys hiking, playing with her new dog, and practicing her Spanish. You can reach her at Kori.VanDerGeest@state.nm.us. Welcome to our team, Kori!



Funding Awarded to Advance Farm to ECE

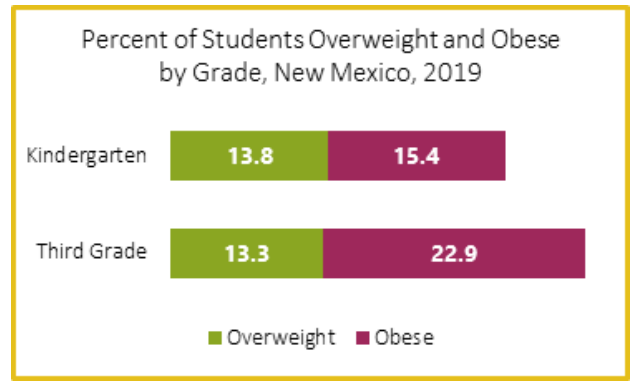
Annual NM childhood obesity data has repeatedly emphasized the importance of shaping healthy behaviors at younger ages. Incorporating more healthy eating opportunities into the early care & education (ECE) setting is one way to do this. In early October, our team applied for and was awarded a competitive grant to form a statewide coalition and build capacity for implementing farm to ECE initiatives in NM!

In close partnership with the Departments of Public Education and Early Childhood Education and Care, we are formalizing an interagency procurement system based on existing farm to school infrastructure for ECE sites to buy local food from NM farmers, ranchers, and producers. We are also selecting pilot sites from areas of the state with strong Hispanic, Native American, and US border population representation to implement comprehensive and culturally appropriate farm to ECE initiatives.

Our statewide NM Grown Coalition (as we recently decided to call ourselves) is led by Alena Paisano, a Native American woman from NM with strong experience implementing farm to cafeteria initiatives at the national, state, and local levels and partnering directly with the populations and communities we intend to reach. Lessons learned this year will guide how we scale farm to ECE and ensure equitable access statewide. We are excited to grow into this new area of work and will eagerly share updates as we progress!

BMI Surveillance Update

As most of you know by now, COVID-19 made the systematic collection of childhood obesity data impossible for us and our partners in the 2020-21 school year. Though we'll have to wait until the upcoming school year to resume surveillance efforts, comprehensive data released in the spring of 2020 paint a powerful picture. As indicated in the adjacent graph, obesity prevalence continues to increase substantially in the three years between kindergarten and third grade. Data collected from 2010 to 2019 show fluctuation in obesity rates among both kindergarten and third grade students, with no evident upward or downward trend. View the full report here: [NM Childhood Obesity 2019 Update](#)



Community Snapshot: *Guadalupe County*



Despite the challenges this past year has brought, the Santa Rosa farmers' market may have seen its most successful season yet! In an area where fresh produce can be hard to come by, demand for seasonal fruits & veggies was at an all-time high. HKHC coordinators JoAnn Rivera-Velasquez and Ronald Gutierrez reported an average of 50 community members who consistently showed up each week, and senior check redemption was up 20% compared to last year. Plans are underway to offer tastings next season, pending the evolution of COVID-19.

Community Snapshot: *Zuni Pueblo*



HKHC Zuni Pueblo, coordinated by the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (ZYEP), has been committed to ensuring youth throughout the pueblo have access to healthy foods and ways to be physically active during the pandemic. In addition to implementing a virtual cross-country league, summer camp, traditional dance class, and nutrition education class, the ZYEP team distributed over 3,500 wellness kits over the course of the year! Kits contained items like yoga mats, pedometers, garden starting essentials, sketch pads, healthy snacks, exercise cards and posters to complement an instructional video created in partnership with the NM United soccer team, and \$10 fruit & veggie vouchers for families to use at the local store.

Community Spotlight: *Serving Hot & Healthy in Colfax County*



When New Mexico closed its schools in March, the logistics of serving hot, healthy meals to students were overwhelming – food safety, transportation, parent communication, and the upheaval of an evolving pandemic. But Michael Romero-Sandoval focused on his goal more than the challenges.

“I knew tons of parents were staying home with their kids trying to help them with schoolwork, and I thought maybe this could be a break for the parents – some kind of relief that they don't have to make breakfast and lunch,” said Romero-Sandoval, director at A'viands, Raton Public Schools' food service company. “That was important to me, that kids still received healthy meals and parents had this sense that they're okay.” Romero-Sandoval partnered with school transportation staff to establish seven delivery routes and together, they delivered 1,200 breakfasts and lunches every school day to every child, regardless of age. Romero-Sandoval also established a Facebook page to keep parents informed.

His food service staff are diligent about providing hot, healthy meals that include NM grown foods like apples from Dixon and corn from Deming. To celebrate NM Grown Week in October, Romero-Sandoval worked with HKHC Colfax County to offer tamale pies and cornbread with blue corn meal from Santa Ana Pueblo and calabacitas, squash, and red chile from southern New Mexico. “Our kids loved it,” he said. “A lot of people don't realize we have more than just chile grown here. We tell students where the food came from.”



Toni Kuchan, head cook at Maxwell schools, matches Romero-Sandoval's enthusiasm for supporting local growers and providing healthy meals. With a grant from the NM Grown program, she purchases a variety of state-grown vegetables and teaches kids about nearby growers while feeding them creative meals like breakfast muffins with squash. She's aware more kids are sedentary during the pandemic, so she loads their meals with local fruits and vegetables, including homemade zucchini bread and leftover bananas or pears she dehydrates to avoid wasting food. “We're working really hard to stay in compliance and also give them hot lunches instead of all sandwiches and processed food,” she said. “Feeding them healthy foods is very important to me.”

School Wellness Doesn't Skip A Beat

This past spring when all in-person trainings and professional development opportunities were abruptly cancelled or postponed, Jimmie Thompson and Anne Marlow-Geter from the Public Education Department's (PED) Safe & Healthy Schools Bureau understood the importance of transitioning to a virtual platform as quickly as possible – resources to support school and staff wellness during a pandemic would be more relevant and necessary than ever! So, the duo led the way in continuing to offer trainings to schools across the state virtually. With planning help from ONAPA and several other partners, PED hosted six virtual statewide trainings since July. Trainings included plenty of resources and ideas for preparing healthy school meals and snacks, engaging students in PE and physical activity during the virtual school day, supporting staff wellness and mental health, continuing the work of School Health Advisory Councils, and reinforcing the importance of social and emotional learning for children, especially in the virtual learning environment. All the trainings were well attended – in total, 334 school staff from 62 different districts participated. Our team here at ONAPA is grateful for our strong partnership with PED and the work we do together to help schools, students, and communities embody health at all levels!

HKHC Communities Receive Funding to Expand Outdoor Recreation

This past fall, the NM Outdoor Recreation Division announced the inaugural award recipients of the Outdoor Equity Fund (OEF), created to allow all youth equitable access to the outdoors, and the Special Projects and Outdoor Infrastructure Fund. Both grants support transformative outdoor experiences that foster stewardship and respect for our land, water, and cultural heritage.

OEF awardees in HKHC communities include: Mil Abrazos Community Land Trust: The Enduring Acequia Program (Guadalupe County); Global Opportunities Unlimited (San Juan County); Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (Zuni Pueblo), STEAMing Ahead for Success: NM Park Restoration Challenge (Grant & Hidalgo Counties); Heart of the Gila; Kids in Need of Supportive Services; and Western New Mexico University Outdoor Program (Grant County). All projects and initiatives are focused on engaging youth in recreation and environmental education opportunities focused around local streams, rivers, watersheds, and/or acequias.

Special Projects and Outdoor Infrastructure Fund awardees in HKHC communities include Southwest New Mexico Arts, Culture, and Tourism (Grant County) and the Continental Divide Trail Coalition (Hidalgo County). Funding will support the creation of an outdoor pavilion and formal trail from the Waterworks to Penny Park in Silver City and trail enhancements, infrastructure, and outreach in the Lordsburg region.



Part of the existing trail system

Cooke and her partners applied for a couple years ago.

The first two projects include improving and revitalizing trails surrounding the fishing pond and nearby picnic area. Existing trails will be leveled, layered with gravel, and cleared of invasive trees and overgrown brush. For now, San Ildefonso Pueblo is still closed to the public. When it's safe for them to reopen again, Cooke will revisit plans made last summer with the Rocky Mountain Youth Conservation Corps to recruit and train local high school and Northern New Mexico College students to assist with trail construction and maintenance. Due to the pandemic, San Ildefonso residents and visitors have not been fishing at the pond.

In these moments of quiet, a river otter has taken up residence, happily feasting on the pond's abundant fish.



Community Snapshot:

San Ildefonso Pueblo

With help from HKHC coordinator Martha Cooke, San Ildefonso Pueblo is in the process of planning trail enhancements in alignment with specific goals outlined in their recently approved Master Recreation Plan. The Plan was drafted in partnership with the National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program – a technical assistance grant

Recess Before Lunch Policy Sparks Positive Changes in Dexter

More students are eating their entire lunches and returning to the salad bar for seconds at Dexter Elementary, and it's all because Principal Bernadette Aragon adjusted their schedule so recess comes before lunch. "Kids are a little hungrier because they are active outside first," said Aragon. When students ate lunch first, "they would eat super-fast to get outside or wouldn't eat because they were visiting."

Aragon tested the new policy last year with third graders before expanding it to the entire school this year, a challenging adjustment to student schedules that Aragon considers worth the effort. "Before it killed me to watch full plates go to the trash," she said.

As schools across the state readjust to in-person learning, school leadership is hopeful policies and practices like this one will stick. In Chaves County, HKHC coordinators Paula Camp and Becky Joyce actively encourage their schools to hold recess before lunch because children are more focused on eating healthy food after moving their bodies. And schools are discovering an added bonus – students behave better in the cafeteria and classroom, too!