



# Healthy Kids **Healthy Communities**

BUILDING HEALTHIER TOMORROWS

## Healthy Kids Zuni Pueblo

On the northwestern edge of New Mexico, Zuni Pueblo is the largest of the state's 19 pueblos with nearly 10,000 residents. Most people live within the main village and the nearby community of Blackrock. Zuni is well-known for its rich cultural, linguistic and artistic heritage. However, because of its geographic isolation, Zuni Pueblo has faced challenges in ensuring residents access to diverse activities and healthy food options.

Through the Healthy Kids Healthy Zuni Pueblo Initiative, the community is coming together in what residents say is the most coordinated, comprehensive effort to date to make it easier for people to choose healthy foods and be physically active.

Healthy Kids New Mexico supports the initiative, which includes offering healthier options at the local grocery store, developing community trails, implementing school gardens and forming children's sports leagues.

One of the ways Healthy Kids Healthy Zuni is changing the environment to support healthy lifestyles is by partnering with the local grocery store. Unless people travel 40 miles to Gallup, Halona Plaza is the only store supplying the community with food. By labeling healthy foods, offering new nutritious items and educating people about different produce through food demonstrations and tastings, Halona Plaza is making it easier for customers to identify and choose healthier options.

## Key Community Successes

October 2011 - June 2013

- Offered, promoted and began marketing healthier options in Halona Plaza, the local grocery store
- Hosted regular food demonstrations and provided fruit and vegetable samples at Halona Plaza
- Launched 5 miles of new trail
- Started an edible garden at the Indian Health Services hospital
- Established traditional waffle gardens at 2 elementary schools and 1 high school
- Developed youth soccer and basketball leagues to encourage children to be more physically active
- Expanded youth soccer league from 2 teams in the first year to 12 teams including at least 150 children in the third year

Nearly all (10,000) Zuni Pueblo residents have access to healthier food options via Halona Plaza, the community farmer's market and the Food Distribution Program.

A newly established network of community trails provides increased physical activity opportunities to nearly all (10,000) Zuni Pueblo residents.

Shoppers can try fruit and vegetable samples and learn ways to prepare healthy meals. Now, because customers request food featured in demos, the store stocks a healthier variety of produce.



“There’s been a big increase in lettuce, melons and squash. Sales almost doubled with melons since the partnership and awareness,” said Loren Thomas, who owns the store with his Dad, Roger Thomas.

“I think it’s making a huge difference. Our community is facing a lot of different issues related to health – diabetes and obesity – and I think one of the key components is providing education about how to improve food and providing greater access to healthy food. I really think we’re hitting these two areas.”

Dr. Valory Wangler, a family physician who has been working with Halona Plaza on healthy initiatives, anticipates positive change ahead. “I think this sort of whole environment change where it’s suddenly easier to make healthier choices will have a big impact,” she said. “I think it’s definitely been the missing piece.”

Environmental change also means creating a physical environment that is more conducive to activity, and that is where Healthy Kids Zuni’s new trail system comes in. Community organizations are coming together to create a series of trails throughout the pueblo that facilitate getting out and getting fit.



The Bear Trail, the first in the series, is a five mile route along Dowa Yalanne Mesa, the towering rock formation overlooking the pueblo and a site of cultural importance to Zuni residents. Trail markers show walkers, runners, hikers and bikers how far they have traveled and include artwork by a community member as well as inspirational phrases in the Zuni language.





To show community members that produce can come from small-scale gardening, the Indian Health Services hospital recently started an eight raised bed demonstration garden. Hospital staff work together to plant and tend the garden and nurses have already cooked up delicious salads and salsas. Patients pass the garden on each trip from the parking lot to the hospital and often comment that they feel motivated to try gardening at home after viewing the hospital site.

To help children learn about fresh vegetables, Healthy Kids Healthy Zuni is partnering with schools and other local organizations. Students helped create a large traditional Zuni waffle garden at Twin Buttes High School as well as smaller gardens at Dowa Yalanne Elementary (known as DY) and A:Shiwi Elementary, said Zowie Banteah-Yuselew, who works on the Healthy Kids' school gardens.

The A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center showed youth how to create a traditional waffle garden, and a nutritionist from the New Mexico Department of Health's Women, Infants and Children Program taught health lessons in conjunction with the gardening.



Healthy Kids Healthy Zuni has tied together the garden projects with its focus on increasing physical activity for children. At local soccer games, community members can take home produce cultivated from the summer camp garden.

People earn the fresh vegetables by listening to nutrition education and participating in games, such as guessing how many teaspoons of sugar are in a soda. About 50 to 70 people listen to educational sessions and pick up vegetables at each local soccer game, said Banteah-Yuselew, who grew up in Zuni.

“We are hoping each year we build upon it, and more people will be interested so we can do a community farmer’s market,” she said.

Darnell Wallace, a parent and soccer coach, has taken advantage of the nutrition education offered at the games. She’s brought home radishes, eggplant, green chile, green beans, squash and carrots. She made baked sweet potato fries from a recipe a nutritionist from Indian Health Services gave her.

“It’s one of my kids’ favorites,” she said.

The soccer games address Healthy Kids Healthy Zuni’s goal of making it easier for kids to be active. The initiative developed soccer and basketball leagues as some of the pueblo’s first organized extracurricular physical activities for elementary-school children.

The leagues have done more than get kids active at two practices and one game a week. They have brought the community together to mentor and cheer for their kids, age 6 to 11, who are learning a sport and gaining confidence. And the program keeps growing – from two teams in the first year to 12 teams with about 150 kids and a waiting list of 30 in the third year. There are three to four volunteer coaches per team; most are parents.

“Parents have been really invested in it,” Dr. Tom Faber, M.D., coordinator of Healthy Kids Healthy Zuni Pueblo, said. “We’ve been able to keep kids physically active, expand the number of kids each year and also promote parental involvement and positive mentors.”

The success has been about relationships. Previously schools were reluctant to open their fields and gyms because of vandalism. Faber and his extensive crew of volunteer coaches made sure they were good partners with the schools; they cleaned up after themselves, stayed on time and grew the program slowly. All the games are played at the Zuni Public School District’s facilities.

The way Faber has built relationships makes it likely that the program can be sustained. After buying balls and other sports equipment, everything else is free – all volunteer coaches and free facilities. The program doesn’t cost the participants anything either.

“Relationship building has grown each year,” Faber said. “In general everybody here – not just the principals and teachers and Tribal Council – has been really receptive to our ideas and our plans to work together.”