

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

A periodic feature that recognizes individuals whose efforts—often unsung—enhance the health of North Carolinians

Sherée Vodicka, MA, RD, LDN



As the executive director of the North Carolina Alliance of YMCAs, Sherée Vodicka, MA, RD, LDN, advocates on behalf of all 27 independent YMCA associations in the state. She also serves as the chair of Eat Smart, Move More North Carolina, a state-

wide collaborative of almost 100 partner organizations that is working to reduce and prevent obesity through promotion of evidence-based practices for healthy living. A dietitian and nutritionist by training, Vodicka has devoted her career to obesity prevention and healthy living. Prior to leading the North Carolina Alliance of YMCAs, Vodicka was the executive director of Advocates for Health in Action, a position she took after serving for 8 years as communications manager for the Physical Activity and Nutrition branch of the North Carolina Division of Public Health.

Vodicka is a staunch proponent of using evidence-based policy in the fight to prevent obesity. She currently oversees the YMCA Statewide Pioneering Healthy Communities initiative, which is funded by a competitive grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. This initiative revolves around 4 goals: making healthy food accessible everywhere, creating pedestrian and bike-friendly infrastructure, promoting physical activity and nutrition in out-of-school programs, and supporting healthy food in youth sports [1].

Vodicka's advocacy has gone a long way toward achieving these goals. "I am very excited about working on state-level policy change that will help high-priority communities," she says. Among her many successes, Vodicka is particularly proud of recent advocacy efforts that have resulted in legislative action. Under her leadership, the YMCA championed a bill that will open school playgrounds to public use after school hours; this bill was recently signed into law. This type of legislation is especially important for communities that have few parks or sidewalks because it reduces common barriers to physical activity.

The YMCAs are also supporting 2 bills that are

currently in front of the state legislature. The first is a YMCA-led effort to establish voluntary nutrition and activity standards for after-school programs. The second initiative, to promote healthy food in corner stores, is a partnership with the North Carolina Alliance for Health. Both bills have passed the House and are awaiting Senate action.

According to Betsy Vetter, senior director of government relations at the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association, Vodicka's tireless advocacy exemplifies her challenge-driven nature. "She employs the 'yes we can' motto, and she enjoys taking a project from envisioning to completion," says Vetter, who has worked closely with Vodicka since her time at the Division of Public Health. Doug McMillan, chief executive officer of the YMCA of the Triangle agrees, citing Vodicka's considerable capacity for "connecting to each independent Y and bringing us closer together with a common voice and common goals." He says that Vodicka is an effective leader because she has "a vision for partnerships and significant YMCA work outside of the walls of the Y."

Vodicka herself recognizes the considerable challenges associated with driving statewide change from the nonprofit sector. She says that nonprofit organizations and private organizations throughout the state have already taken great collective strides, but she adds that the support of state decision makers will be critical to transforming North Carolina into a model of healthy living over the long run. **NCMJ**

Reference

1. North Carolina Alliance of YMCAs. Statewide Pioneering Healthier Communities. YMCA website. <http://www.ncymcaalliance.org/statewide-pioneering-healthier-communities/> Accessed June 23, 2015.

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