

State-Level Action for Health

Joe Manchin III

Health is certainly one of most critical components when measuring quality of life and prosperity for a state. As governor of West Virginia, I am committed to doing what it takes to make certain every citizen is aware of the importance of daily exercise and healthy eating.

Further, I am dedicated to changing our state's culture with respect to good nutrition and physical activity. I believe the burden of obesity and related diseases in West Virginia requires a strong state infrastructure with a specific focus on physical activity, nutrition, and obesity prevention. Fortunately, West Virginia has a solid ethic of collaboration, and our people share a sense of pride, tradition, culture, and customs. The cohesive and protective nature of the state fosters a service philosophy and West Virginia citizens embrace the opportunity to help their own.

When I became governor in 2005, I realized there were many ongoing efforts, both formal and informal and under myriad organizations, aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles for West Virginians. I strongly believe it is my responsibility to not only provide a framework in which local, state, and institutional policymakers can work collaboratively to create and support environments that make it easier for West Virginians to choose healthy foods and to be physically active, but also to create state policy that would support existing efforts.

I am very pleased that in 2005 the West Virginia Legislature, upon my request, passed the West Virginia Healthy Lifestyles Act. This act signified that the leadership in West Virginia not only acknowledged that we were truly facing a public health epidemic, but that we also were prepared to be both bold and innovative in our efforts to reduce West Virginia's prevalence of obesity.

The West Virginia Healthy Lifestyles Act created a 13-member coalition as well as a clinical advisory committee, appointed by the governor. The Healthy Lifestyle Coalition and its Clinical Advisory Committee focus on establishing and supporting public policy specific to promoting physical activity and nutrition.

This legislation also recognized that children and adolescents spend the majority of their time in schools; therefore it is critical that schools incorporate healthful

eating and physical activity as part of a total learning environment. Therefore, the legislation specifically targeted the following public school issues:

1. increasing access to healthy beverages
2. increasing physical education time
3. regular fitness testing
4. regular Body Mass Index assessment
5. health education assessment.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recognized this innovative legislation (and the quality and longevity of West Virginia's academic-state partnerships) by funding a two-year statewide evaluation of the Healthy Lifestyles Act.

This funding has presented West Virginia with a unique opportunity to systematically assess the implementation and impact of the public policy.

I am blessed to be the governor of a great state that is full of friendly, hard-working people who care about each other and cherish the natural beauty within the state's borders. Every day, citizens collectively take pride in West Virginia's heritage and have a steadfast commitment to build a better state for today's citizens and for future generations to come.

As we move forward with our work both at the state and national levels, I think it is important that we remember that it is about everyday people both improving their nutritional lifestyles and eating well, and participating in appropriate and meaningful levels of physical activity, every day.

It is also about everyday work that leverages resources and demonstrates true collaboration that monitors outcomes and sustains the ability to quickly improve. It is about everyday planning that captures emerging ways that improve nutrition and increase physical activity, which spreads success and generates opportunities through stronger partnerships.

And, finally, it is about everyday change in positive performance benchmarks that gauge our progress and, most importantly, result in better health of our citizens.

Manchin is the governor of West Virginia.