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UAMS Receives \$1.28 Million Pledge to Develop School Nutrition Program for Healthier Food Choices in Northwest Arkansas

FAYETTEVILLE — The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) will expand partnerships with local school districts to implement a school nutrition enrichment program in Northwest Arkansas to provide healthier food choices for students. The program expansion is supported by a \$1.28 million grant from the Alice L. Walton Foundation.

It will build on a successful pilot program implemented by UAMS' Office of Community Health & Research to improve nutrition in schools. The UAMS school nutrition program will be working with six school districts in Northwest Arkansas – beginning with Bentonville and Springdale in 2020 – to implement a comprehensive nutrition program. UAMS will add two additional school districts each year in 2021 and 2022, and has hopes of expanding the program through Northwest Arkansas and the state.

“We have been very successful in reducing the amount of sodium in school lunches and providing healthier food choices for students,” said Pearl McElfish, Ph.D., vice chancellor for the UAMS Northwest Regional Campus. “Thanks to this additional funding, we can expand our efforts and help more schools build sustainable and healthier nutrition programs with a focus on reducing sugar and saturated fat, and increasing fruits and vegetables.”

In the pilot program, the UAMS Healthy Food System team assisted the K-12 Springdale School District and meal programs with food service guidelines and nutrition standards, new practices designed to improve menus and food preparation practices primarily focused on reducing sodium.

The UAMS school nutrition program will support each district to make significant and realistic nutritional improvements to their food, and work to sustain those changes through hands-on staff training, coaching and support to overcome budget issues and

other barriers. The Healthy Food System team focuses on simple but impactful changes, such as moving the salad bar to the front of the lunch line to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, identifying simple recipe swaps to reduce saturated fat and sodium, and improving cafeteria atmosphere through signs and attractive displays.

“The goal is to make the changes as simple and impactful as possible,” McElfish said. “We don’t want the schools to have the added burden when making these changes to improve the health of students.”

The partnership will be tailored to the unique needs of each district’s child nutrition program and will be driven by the involvement of administrators, teachers, school nurses and parents. The UAMS Healthy Food System team will work alongside the district child nutrition director to develop goals and timelines for the project.

The UAMS Healthy Food Systems team of dietitians will review the nutrient analysis of meals served and provide achievable steps to reduce sugar, saturated fat and sodium while increasing fruit and vegetable consumption. The program supports child nutrition programs through an equipment funding opportunity to ensure long-term, sustainable changes for school kitchens.

The program focuses on a high level of student engagement. Students are involved in taste testing and pick their favorite healthy school lunch recipes. Past engagement has included a district-wide Student Food Show, featuring taste testing of healthier alternatives to popular foods and voting for favorites that were eventually added to the permanent cycle menu.

Hands-on staff training will provide child nutrition workers the skills needed to ensure successful and sustainable changes. Past training has included grain bowl workshops, where project partners learn about different proteins, grains and produce, and how to build a customizable bar for students to create their own grain bowls in the cafeteria. UAMS is the state’s only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. UAMS includes UAMS Health, a statewide health system that encompasses all of UAMS’ clinical enterprise including its hospital, regional clinics and clinics it operates or staffs in cooperation with other providers. UAMS is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. *U.S. News & World Report* named UAMS Medical Center the state’s Best Hospital; ranked its ear, nose and throat program among the top 50 nationwide; and named six areas as high performing — cancer, colon cancer surgery, heart failure, hip replacement, knee replacement and lung cancer surgery. UAMS has 2,727 students, 870 medical residents and five dental residents. It is the state’s largest public employer with more than 10,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children’s Hospital, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health.

The UAMS Northwest Regional Campus includes 250 medical, pharmacy, nursing and health professions students, 50 medical and pharmacy residents, and 1,000 community-based faculty. The campus has nine clinics including a student-led clinic and physical, occupational and speech therapy. Faculty conduct research to reduce health disparities.

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