

# Wahkiakum County Child Care Center Helps Children Start and Stay Healthy

## Issue

About 25 percent of children ages 2 to 4 in Washington are overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> Children with an unhealthy weight are more at risk for health problems like asthma, diabetes, and heart disease. Eating well and being physically active at home, in school, and in early learning centers can help children stay at a healthy weight. The St. James Family Center in Wahkiakum County is making sure that happens for children in their care.

Wahkiakum County is home to about 4,000 people, including 530 children under age 14.<sup>2</sup> The St. James Family Center in Cathlamet is the only licensed child care center in the county.<sup>3</sup> It offers a range of programs for children ages 2½ to 12 with the capacity to care for up to 82 children (36 preschool slots and 46 licensed childcare slots).

## Intervention

The center's mission is to strengthen families by promoting self-sufficiency, life-long learning, and healthy living. Signing up for the federal Let's Move! Child Care Initiative to prevent obesity in young children was a natural fit. The initiative goals cover physical activity, screen time, food, beverages, and infant feeding. "It didn't take long to complete the Let's Move! process," says Esther Mendez, the child care coordinator for the St. James Family Center. "We printed out the online checklist and checked off all of the things we were already doing. Then we could see where we didn't quite meet the goals." Mendez worked with center director Beth Hansen, the health care coordinator, and the cook to make the needed changes. The cook revised menu plans to eliminate fried foods. The center also reduced screen time for the children from one hour per week to 30 minutes.

## Impact

The St. James Family Center received their Let's Move certificate in December 2011. During the process, the full staff and board were kept informed, and parents learned about the changes through monthly newsletters. Mendez hasn't received any complaints from kids about the new menu options and notices kids being more active. She notes that parents often ask the center staff for advice on what can be done at home to keep their child healthy. "It [the certification] lets parents know that we are working on this on our end and then there are also things that they can do." Hansen recommends this process to other child care centers. "It was a valuable self-assessment process, and it helps us to keep the goals for healthy eating and active play front and center."

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### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> Served by the WIC Nutrition Program in 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2012 American Community Survey.
- <sup>3</sup> The center is aligned with the St. James Episcopal Church in Cathlamet. However, all family center programs are non-religious and everyone in the community is welcome to participate.

