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UAMS Announces Sodium Reduction Initiative in Northwest Arkansas

LITTLE ROCK – The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) announced a new initiative in northwest Arkansas designed to reduce sodium intake in area schools and in meal programs that feed the region’s food insecure — those who lack reliable access to affordable, nutritious food.

The project, Reducing Sodium Intake for Everyone (RISE), is funded through a \$1.98 million five-year award from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

“We know that reducing sodium intake is a key component of a heart-healthy diet, and we know that food insecurity is also associated with health issues like hypertension, heart disease and diabetes,” said Pearl McElfish, Ph.D., associate vice chancellor for UAMS’ Northwest Regional Campus. “The RISE initiative is designed to help schools and meal programs that primarily serve the food insecure provide healthier meals and nutrition education with the goal of improving the overall health of our communities.”

According to the CDC, about 90 percent of Americans consume too much sodium, increasing their risk of high blood pressure and other cardiovascular diseases. Estimates from the American Heart Association suggest that if Americans reduced their average intake of sodium from 3,400 mg a day to 1,500 mg a day, it could result in a 25.6 percent overall decrease in blood pressure and an estimated \$26.2 billion in health care savings, as well as reducing the number of deaths from cardiovascular disease. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States.

RISE will be administered by the Office of Community Health and Research at UAMS’ northwest campus and will initially focus on improving the nutrition content of meals in the Springdale School District and in meal programs administered by the Promise Land Food Program in Springdale, Samaritan Community Center in Rogers and Springdale, and United Methodist First Church in Springdale.

UAMS staff will assist the school district and meal programs with new food service guidelines and nutrition standards, new practices designed to obtain lower sodium foods, and changes in menus and in food preparation practices. Nutrition and health education for students and families

will also aid in the overall sodium reduction goals. Over the next five years, UAMS plans to expand the reach of the program into other northwest Arkansas school districts and meal programs, reaching tens of thousands of individuals and families in the region.

"We have a new target around the corner in the reduction of sodium in our school lunches and breakfasts. We look forward to the partnership with UAMS as we work to educate our students on flavorful substitutes for sodium in the foods they eat at school and at home," said Carol Godfrey, supervisor of food service, Springdale Public Schools.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is phasing in new lower sodium requirements for all school lunch and breakfast programs as part of a process begun in 2012. With assistance from UAMS and the CDC, Springdale Public Schools should reach the USDA final target well ahead of the 2022 target date.

"We are so excited to work with UAMS on the RISE program," said Bonnie Faitak, SnackPacks for Kids program coordinator at Samaritan Community Center. "We know the long-term impacts of health and education are linked, and we want to help ensure the best future for the children we serve."

In the last school year, Samaritan distributed more than 280,000 SnackPacks to nearly 10,000 northwest Arkansas children. Samaritan's meal programs provide nearly 100,000 meals each year and ensure that children continue to receive meals when school is not in session.

RISE builds on existing Community Health and Research projects underway at UAMS. Current projects include a study of the effectiveness of a culturally appropriate, family-centered model of diabetes education in the Marshallese community and a CDC award to address health disparities among Marshallese and Hispanic residents of Washington and Benton counties.

The CDC grant is part of the Sodium Reduction in Communities Program. Nine awardees, including UAMS, were given grants to help reduce sodium intake in their communities.

UAMS is the state's only comprehensive academic health center, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; a hospital; a northwest Arkansas regional campus; a statewide network of regional centers; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, the Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, the Myeloma Institute, the Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, the Psychiatric Research Institute, the Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging and the Translational Research Institute. It is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 2,870 students, 799 medical residents and five dental residents. It is the state's largest public employer with more than 10,000 employees, including about 1,000 physicians and other professionals who provide care to patients at UAMS, Arkansas Children's Hospital, the VA Medical Center and UAMS regional centers throughout the state. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) or [Instagram](#).

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