

Envisioning a healthy nation where wellness is achievable for all individuals and communities



STRENGTHENING THE FOUNDATION FOR HEALTH AND EQUITY

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

As we move further into 2026, I continue to feel grateful for the strength of our partnerships and the shared commitment that drives our work at the Public Health Institute's Center for Wellness and Nutrition (PHI CWN). The dedication of our staff, collaborators, and community partners is what makes this work possible, and I remain inspired by the collective effort to advance wellness and equity across diverse communities.

February is an important moment in the year—not only a time to reflect on our goals, but a time to begin putting those intentions into action. Across our work, we are focused on building the tools, systems, and relationships that make wellness possible in communities over the long term.

At PHI CWN, we know that lasting impact requires more than individual initiatives. It requires strong infrastructure, trusted collaboration, and a continued focus on equity—so that communities have access to the resources, support, and opportunities they need to thrive. In a time of shifting systems and ongoing uncertainty in the public health and nutrition landscape, strengthening shared resources and networks is more important than ever.

Whether we are supporting partners on the ground, developing accessible tools, or helping communities navigate changing conditions, our work is grounded in the belief that wellness is built through connection, access, and community-driven solutions.

As the public health landscape continues to evolve, we remain committed to adapting with care and intention, while staying rooted in our mission.

Thank you for being part of this mission and for the important work you do each day to support healthier communities. Together, we are building a foundation for healthier futures, one connection, one resource, and one community at a time.

With gratitude,

Erika Takada
Executive Director, PHI CWN

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HONORING BLACK HISTORY MONTH THROUGH HEART HEALTH EQUITY

Black History Month is a time to honor resilience, excellence, and community, while also reflecting on the health inequities that continue to affect Black Americans. One critical area where these disparities are evident is **heart health**.

Black Americans have historically faced barriers to cardiovascular care and prevention, contributing to disproportionate health outcomes. Heart disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States, and Black adults experience approximately a **35% higher mortality rate from cardiovascular disease** compared to the overall U.S. population.¹ These disparities are not solely the result of individual choices—they are deeply rooted in structural inequities, including limited access to quality healthcare, nutritious foods, safe spaces for physical activity, and the chronic stress associated with racism and socioeconomic inequality.

While systemic change is essential, there are also community-level and individual strategies that can help reduce cardiovascular disease and promote heart health.

Awareness

Awareness is the first step toward prevention. Understanding the **risk factors for heart disease** empowers individuals to make informed health decisions. Awareness also helps people recognize early warning signs and seek care promptly—actions that can save lives.²

Nutrition

A heart-healthy diet plays a major role in preventing cardiovascular disease. Diets rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats can significantly lower risk.³ However, access to affordable, high-quality foods is not equal across all communities. Supporting initiatives that address food deserts, providing culturally relevant nutrition education, and increasing access to nutritious foods are crucial steps in promoting heart health within Black communities.

Screenings

Regular health screenings are key for early detection and prevention. Monitoring blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar can identify risk factors before they develop into serious conditions. Simple actions like visiting a primary care provider or participating in free community screenings can have a powerful impact on heart health.³

Heart health is a community effort. By raising awareness, improving nutrition, and prioritizing regular screenings, we can take meaningful steps to reduce cardiovascular disparities and honor Black History Month through action that strengthens both individual and community well-being.

References:

1. American Heart Association, *Circulation Journal*
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Heart Disease Risk Factors
3. Mayo Clinic – Heart Disease Prevention



BREAKING THE STRESS CYCLE: HOW “TAKE SPACE TO PAUSE” HELPS TEENS FIND CALM

When things feel like a lot, reach out to talk it out



Stress isn't just a fleeting feeling, it's a cycle that the mind and body move through, beginning with a trigger and ideally ending with a sense of safety and relief. When that cycle isn't completed, we can remain stuck in a heightened, hyper-alert state. Over time, this makes us more sensitive to the next stressor and can contribute to burnout, exhaustion, or emotional overwhelm. Learning how to complete the stress cycle is an important part of maintaining well-being, especially for teenagers and young people navigating school demands, social pressures, family expectations, and the challenges of adolescence.

Take Space to Pause, a California-based statewide campaign created **for youth, by youth**, is part of the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative. The campaign was developed under the California Department of Public Health's Office of Health Equity and implemented in partnership with PHI CWN to support youth-centered, culturally responsive mental health outreach across the state. The campaign helps young people recognize the early signs of stress before reaching a breaking point and introduces simple, proactive strategies to regain balance.

Its core message encourages youth to “pause”—taking intentional moments away from stress to reflect, reset, and use tools that activate the body's natural calming system.

Resources on the **Take Space to Pause website** guide youth in building personalized “Pause Plans”, identifying what triggers their stress, and practicing coping skills before stress becomes overwhelming.

The campaign also works to reduce stigma and promote help-seeking behaviors by normalizing mental health conversations.

Completing the stress cycle doesn't mean fixing every problem. Instead, it's about reassuring the nervous system that the danger has passed and giving yourself space to recover. Whether through deep breathing, taking a short walk, talking with a trusted friend, or engaging in a calming activity, small intentional pauses can help break the loop of tension and restore balance.

By empowering youth to understand stress and respond with practical tools, Take Space to Pause offers a strengths-based approach to building resilience and supporting mental health.

To learn more, visit [TakeSpacetopause.org](https://www.takespacetopause.org).

Follow on Instagram for youth-created tools and managing stress and building Pause Plans: @takespacetopause



USDA AND HHS RELEASE 2025–2030 DIETARY GUIDELINES: “EAT REAL FOOD”



In January 2026, the **USDA** and HHS released the **2025–2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs)**, signaling a major shift in federal nutrition policy with the overarching message: **“Eat Real Food.”**

Key Shifts in the 2025–2030 Guidelines

- **Prioritizing Whole Foods:** The guidelines emphasize nutrient-dense, minimally processed foods while explicitly discouraging “highly processed” items like packaged snacks and convenience meals linked to chronic disease.
- **Protein & Dairy Targets:** New targets recommend 1.2–1.6g of protein per kg of body weight daily, about double the previous recommendation. The new Food Pyramid and RealFood.gov resources prioritize animal proteins and full-fat dairy—a move that seemingly contradicts cardiovascular guidelines to limit saturated fat to under 10% of daily calories. This shift not only complicates heart-health messaging but also de-emphasizes the essential role of plant proteins in sustainable, healthy diets.
- **Added Sugar Limits:** For the first time, the guidelines set a **specific cap of 10 grams of added sugar per meal**, and recommend complete avoidance of added sugars for children under 10.
- **Visual Overhaul:** The familiar MyPlate has been replaced by a redesigned Food Pyramid, visually prioritizing whole grains, proteins, and produce.

The Public Health Challenge: Equity and Implementation

While these guidelines aim for better health, they present significant hurdles for low-income families.

The emphasis on high-protein and fresh dairy coincides with the **One Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025 (H.R. 1)**, which mandates that Thrifty Food Plan updates remain “cost-neutral”.

Consequently, SNAP benefit levels may not rise to meet the increased costs of these newly recommended “real food” patterns. Furthermore, institutions like schools and hospitals face immense pressure to transition from “heat-and-serve” models to scratch cooking with limited infrastructure, budget, and staff skills.

Building Capacity for Change

Public health organizations play a critical role in bridging the gap between policy and practice. PHI CWN continues to translate science-based nutrition guidance into culturally appropriate, budget-friendly solutions.

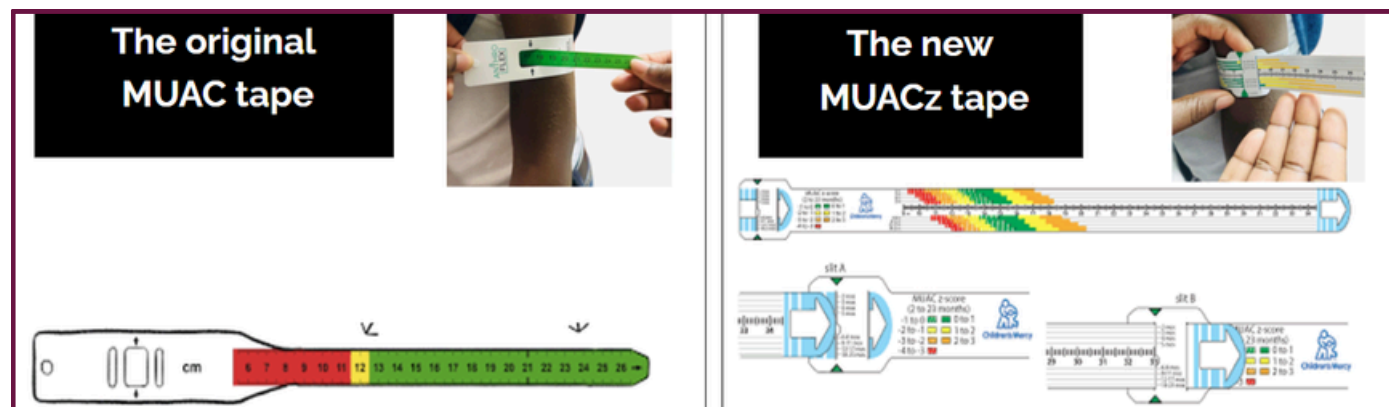
Our support includes:

- **Institutional Support:** Technical assistance for schools and hospitals to redesign menus, upgrade kitchens, and train staff in scratch cooking.
- **Retail & Supply Chain:** Partnerships to increase access to “real food” in small markets and underserved neighborhoods.
- **Equity-Centered Education:** Budget-conscious nutrition toolkits highlighting affordable proteins (e.g., eggs, beans, canned fish) and culturally responsive meal planning.

Turning Guidelines into Impact

We can help your organization implement these new guidelines and strengthen local healthy eating and food systems initiatives. **Contact us** to explore projects, partnerships, and tailored support.

A SIMPLE TAPE MAKING A BIG DIFFERENCE IN CHILDHOOD NUTRITION: RETHINKING COMMUNITY NUTRITION SCREENING IN KENYA



Millions of children worldwide suffer from malnutrition, often without early identification for timely treatment. A sub-study of the ALIMUS – We Are Feeding! project aimed to address gaps in community nutrition screening through an innovative **MUAC z-score (MUACz) tape**.

Global estimates from the World Health Organization show that in 2024, over 150 million children experienced stunting (too short for their age), 42.8 million were wasted (too thin for their age), and 35.5 million were overweight (too heavy for their age). In rural and low-resource settings, health workers rely on simple tools to detect nutrition risks—but these tools can miss mild or early forms of malnutrition. A recent study in BMC Public Health demonstrates how a small innovation, combined with strong collaboration, can make a meaningful difference.

The MUACz Tape: What It Is and Why It Matters

For decades, community health volunteers have used a tri-colored measuring tape, the MUAC tape, to screen children for severe undernutrition. While effective, the tool focuses mainly on the most severe cases, applies only to children under five, and doesn't track growth over time.

The MUACz tape builds on this familiar approach with several key improvements:

- Age-specific z-scores printed directly on the tape
- Expanded age range from 2 months to 18 years
- Additional colors to flag both under- and over-nutrition

These enhancements allow health workers to identify at-risk children earlier, more accurately, and without complicated calculations.

Lessons from the Front Line

The study, led by an international team including PHI CWN's Dominic Bassah, Emilie McClintic, and Dr. Raissa Sorgho, in partnership with the University of Heidelberg, the Kenya Medical Research Institute, and Abbott, also explored real-world implementation.

Through focus groups with Community Health Volunteers and Ministry of Health staff in Siaya County, Kenya, the study captured several frontline perspectives:

- Health workers described the MUACz tape as easy to use, intuitive, and empowering after hands-on training delivered in locally understandable language.
- They valued being able to explain results clearly to caregivers and identify nutrition risks that were previously missed.
- Challenges included tape durability and small print size, highlighting areas for improvement before scaling.

Looking Ahead

The study demonstrates that frontline health workers can adopt new tools when they are practical, well-explained, and supported by the health system. With design improvements and integration into national health databases, the MUACz tape could help countries detect malnutrition earlier and respond more effectively. This simple measuring tape could play a critical role in improving timely identification and treatment of malnutrition, ultimately saving lives and improving childhood health outcomes.

To read the full study, visit the [NIH National Library of Medicine](#).

Source:

Bassah, Dominic, et al. "Using Mid-Upper Arm Circumference z-score (MUACz) tapes for community-based assessment and monitoring of nutrition risks among young children: a qualitative analysis of experiences and lessons from southwest Kenya." BMC Public Health (2026).

PHI CWN PARTICIPATES IN THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION'S GLOBAL GATHERING

GLOBAL IDEAS FOR U.S. SOLUTIONS

2025 GRANTEE GATHERING



PHI CWN was honored to participate in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Global Grantee Gathering, held November 12–14 in Baltimore, Maryland. The event brought together 120 grantees and partners from more than 90 organizations across 10 countries to celebrate a decade of RWJF's "Global Ideas for U.S. Solutions" initiative, exchange knowledge, and explore innovative approaches to improving health and well-being worldwide.

PHI CWN received funding for its global project, "Unidad Ñuu Savi: Solidarity Beyond Borders," which connects Mixtec and Zapotec communities in Oaxaca, Mexico, and Oxnard, California. Through these community-designed Learning Exchanges, participants explored shared challenges and unique solutions around food security, access to health services, and women's agency. Learn more via our [Story Map](#) and [APHA Film Festival - nominated video](#).

The gathering offered a dynamic mix of networking, learning, and cultural exchange. PHI CWN's Assistant Director of Global Health, Nutrition, and Partnerships, Cassie Chandler, described the experience as particularly enriching:

"The RWJF Global Grantee Gathering was an inspiring experience. It reminded me that real change happens when communities and organizations come together across borders with curiosity, respect, and shared purpose.

Listening to peers from around the world, learning about the challenges and solutions in their work, and sharing lessons from our Mixtec and Zapotec Learning Exchanges reinforced the importance of collaboration, open dialogue, and community-driven approaches in improving health, nutrition, and equity globally."

The meeting structure encouraged knowledge sharing and trust-building through small group discussions, plenary panels, topic-focused breakouts, and group dinners, while participants also explored Baltimore's history, local artists, and cuisine.

The gathering reinforced the power of collaboration, cross-border learning, and community-driven solutions —showing that meaningful progress in global health and nutrition happens when ideas, experiences, and best practices are shared and amplified across contexts.

Photo Caption: The following caption corresponds with the image at the end of the article. PHI CWN's Cassie Chandler at the RWJF Global Grantee Gathering in Baltimore, Maryland.



UPCOMING EVENTS

WORLD OBESITY DAY | MARCH 4

March 4 is World Obesity Day, a global call to action to raise awareness and improve understanding of obesity as a complex, chronic health issue. Led by the World Obesity Federation, this day encourages communities worldwide to prioritize prevention, challenge weight stigma, and address the root causes that contribute to obesity in both children and adults. World Obesity Day also highlights the need for equitable access to supportive care, resources, and healthy environments for all. You can take action by learning more about obesity, supporting inclusive health initiatives, and advocating for compassionate, evidence-based care. To learn more, visit the official [World Obesity Day website](#).



[#WorldObesityDay](#) [#ObesityAwareness](#) [#HealthEquity](#)

NATIONAL DRUG AND ALCOHOL FACTS WEEK | MARCH 15 - 21

March 15–21 is National Drug and Alcohol Facts Week (NDAFW), a national initiative focused on empowering teens with science-based facts about substance use. This week works to dispel myths, reduce misinformation, and increase awareness of the health and social risks associated with alcohol and drug use. NDAFW encourages open conversations between young people, educators, families, and communities to support prevention and informed decision-making. You can take action by hosting a community event, sharing educational resources, or joining the conversation online using the official hashtag. To learn more, visit the [National Institute on Drug Abuse website](#).



[#NDAFW](#) [#SubstanceUsePrevention](#) [#YouthHealth](#)

BRAIN AWARENESS WEEK | MARCH 16 - 22

March 16–22 is Brain Awareness Week, an international celebration of brain science, research, and education. Led by the Dana Foundation, this week promotes public engagement through interactive events like museum exhibits, brain trivia contests, classroom activities, and community outreach. Brain Awareness Week is a reminder of how important brain health is across the lifespan—and how scientific discovery continues to improve our understanding of the brain and nervous system. You can take action by participating in local events, exploring neuroscience resources, or sharing brain health information with your community. To learn more, visit the official [Brain Awareness Week website](#).



[#BrainAwarenessWeek](#) [#BrainHealth](#) [#Neuroscience](#)



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