‘Dump That Sugar!’ Event Kicks Off Howard County Unsweetened Campaign to Reduce Childhood Obesity

New ‘Better Beverage Finder’ Tool Makes it Easy for Parents to Find Healthy Drink Options

Ellicott City, MD – On the shouted command of Burleigh Manor Middle School students – “Dump That Sugar!” – 9.6 tons of “sugar” was dumped at the school. That dramatic gesture officially launched Howard County Unsweetened, a multi-faceted, community-wide campaign to reduce childhood obesity by helping youth and parents choose beverages with lower sugar content. The 9.6 tons of dumped sugar (actually white sand) represented the amount of sugar the school’s students would consume if each drank one 12-ounce soda a day for a year.

“Our goal is as simple as it is positive: To make it easier for parents and kids to make better beverage choices,” said Nicolette Highsmith Vernick, president and CEO of the Horizon Foundation, which is sponsoring the initiative. “We’re joining with the ranks of moms and dads who’ve already said ‘enough’ when it comes to sugary drinks, and we’re encouraging more parents, community leaders and other organizations to join with us as we expand healthy drink choices in Howard County. Nothing less than the future health of our kids is at stake.”

A centerpiece of Howard County Unsweetened is the Better Beverage Finder, which enables parents and kids to identify healthier beverages and to locate nearby stores where they are available in Howard County. The online tool only includes drinks that are low in added sugar, so families can easily find options with few, if any, empty calories. The Better Beverage Finder profiles a wide array of specific drinks and offers user-friendly guidance on whether they are good choices. The tool was created with guidance from Yale University’s Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity and will be mobile-friendly in the coming weeks.

At the event, County Executive Ken Ulman announced an Executive Order to provide only healthy beverage options in county government facilities.

“Healthier beverage choices mean better health for all of us,” said Ulman. “Making it easier for parents and kids to make those healthier choices is at the heart of my Executive Order and the Howard County Unsweetened campaign.”

Joining Highsmith Vernick and Ulman at the event were Dr. Renee Foose, Superintendent of Public Schools; Dr. Maura Rossman, County Health Officer; Siri Neerchal, Student Council President of Burleigh Manor Middle School; Christina Delmont-Small, Howard County mother and President of the PTA Council of Howard County.

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Sponsored by the Horizon Foundation, **Howard County Unsweetened** is a highly-targeted response to the rising epidemic of childhood obesity, which has tripled in the past 30 years. Today, one in four Maryland children is overweight or obese. Sugary drinks are estimated to account for 20 percent of the nation’s overweight problem and are the number one source of empty calories in children’s diets. Obesity is a known risk factor for a wide range of diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, stroke and some forms of cancer.

A second major thrust of the campaign is the **Better Choices Coalition of Howard County**, a broad-based group of organizations that will be working to fill the county’s public spaces with better drink choices.

The ultimate objective of **Howard County Unsweetened** is to reduce childhood obesity by reducing consumption of sugary drinks. A number of benchmark surveys have been conducted on issues such as the amount of sugary drinks consumed by Howard County youth and adult populations. With the assistance of experts at the Rudd Center, follow-up surveys will be conducted to determine the effectiveness of the campaign and to identify areas where more progress can be achieved.

**About the Horizon Foundation:** The Horizon Foundation is an independent philanthropy dedicated to improving the health and wellness of people living and working in Howard County, Maryland. We invest in strategic grants and initiatives to achieve the greatest impact. We also build partnerships and advocate for public policy changes that advance our mission. For more information, visit [thehorizonfoundation.org](http://thehorizonfoundation.org)