Nearly 500 home-based childcare providers across North Dakota are serving healthier meals and snacks to thousands of children in their charge, thanks to a partnership between the American Heart Association’s ANCHOR program and Heartland Child Nutrition, a state sponsor of the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program. The partnership has provided these home childcare providers with on-site training, resource materials and various tools that have helped them to reduce the sodium content in the food they serve to more than 2,100 children in their care. Because diet and taste preferences are established during childhood, helping children become accustomed to eating food lower in sodium, along with more fruits and vegetables, can be crucial to shaping a lifetime of healthy eating habits.

The Challenge
Like behavioral traits, taste preferences can be acquired and developed during childhood. Most American toddlers and preschoolers consume too much sodium in their diets, increasing their chances of developing a fondness for salty foods as they get older. Excessive sodium can lead to high blood pressure, a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease and stroke.

Processed foods, including soup and canned vegetables, often come loaded with salt. But in the rural state of North Dakota, those products can be the most affordable and practical options when fresh fruit and vegetables aren’t in season during fall and winter months. They’re also more likely to be used as staples or key ingredients in the meals served to the young children at home daycare centers.

“This program helped drive childcare home providers to improve the healthy food choices and lower the sodium of meals and snacks they serve to children under their care.”
- Ann Schuetzle, nutrition education director for Heartland Child Nutrition
**The Solution**
The American Heart Association’s Accelerating National Community Health Outcomes through Reinforcing (ANCHOR) Partnerships Program is supporting healthier living in communities around the country. In North Dakota, the local ANCHOR program teamed up with Heartland Child Nutrition to develop a free, in-home training program that teaches daycare providers who receive subsidies from the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program various ways they can reduce sodium levels in the meals they serve. The program also stresses making healthier food purchases, such as buying fresh fruits and vegetables, or picking frozen produce over canned versions when fresh items aren’t as plentiful. They also were encouraged to seek out low-sodium or salt-free varieties whenever possible.

During training, childcare providers were taught how to read food labels for sodium, sugar and fat content. They also were shown steps they could take during meal preparation to make food healthier – like draining and rinsing canned vegetables to slash their sodium content. Homecare providers also were given a packet of materials – including a food strainer and recipe ideas – and offered the chance to take a free, self-study course, Reducing Sodium for Healthier Children, which could satisfy some of the continuing education hours they must fulfill regularly to maintain their license.

**Sustaining Success**
Collaboration between non-profit, community and government organizations can help make it easier for home-based childcare providers to get the resources and training needed to make essential workplace and behavioral changes that often lead to healthier food and beverage decisions affecting children.

Heartland Child Nutrition along with other North Dakota sponsors of the Child and Adult Care Food Program intend to provide ongoing support to sustain the changes that have been made. They also plan to reach out to additional home-based childcare providers.

**Policy, System and Environmental Change**
Reducing the sodium, sugar and fat content in meals and snacks served to children in daycare facilities can help reduce obesity rates and lower the risk of developing chronic illnesses among youth as they get older. By encouraging home childcare providers to make healthier food purchasing decisions at the store, and healthier food preparation choices at home, a foundation for a lifetime of healthy choices is being established.

**Results**
The local ANCHOR project surveyed home childcare providers following their training and found that most of the respondents considered the information they had learned “useful.” Nearly all of them said they had taken steps to reduce sodium levels in the meals they served to children and planned to continue making efforts to cut sodium in the future. More than half of survey respondents also said they had completed the self-study course, Reducing Sodium for Healthier Children.

**Get Involved**
Childcare providers, parents, and community members each play important roles in shaping the food and beverage decisions made for children. Connect with your child’s day care provider or local or state childcare licensing agency to see how you can support children’s health.