

STATE & LOCAL

Issues at the state and community levels

New Jersey mayors taking steps toward more active lifestyles

A LITTLE exercise can have a big impact on health. That is the message that New Jersey's mayors are sending out to their communities as part of a statewide physical activity campaign.

Last year, New Jersey began the Mayors Wellness Campaign, a program designed for its mayors to help improve the health of state residents, more than 57 percent of whom are overweight or obese, according to the non-profit group Trust for America's Health. The ultimate objective is to reach the national Healthy People 2010 goal of reducing obesity rates by 5 percent and lowering health care costs.

The campaign, an initiative of the New Jersey

Health Care Quality Institute in partnership with the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University, is divided into four sections that target children, seniors, employees and the general community. Beginning this spring, mayors have been receiving multimedia toolboxes for each section containing information about various healthy-living programs available in and around New Jersey. Campaign booklets provide detailed information about the programs, contact information and case studies of similar undertakings in other states. New Jersey mayors are encouraged to use the materials to develop exercise programs for their residents.

"The idea is, as people

commit to taking control of their health, all they have to do is go shopping in these manuals," said Ann McDonald, MN, a health care consultant and project manager for the campaign.

The children's toolbox lists a variety of initiatives, including the Miracle League, a baseball league for children with disabilities, and walk-to-school programs.

To reach employees, the campaign materials feature programs designed to combat sedentary lifestyles often found in the workplace, while for seniors, the campaign staff developed 30 tips for the elderly to increase physical activity every day.

McDonald said the first step of the campaign is to get mayors to pledge a commitment to fitness. Mayors are then encouraged to assess their communities to determine which programs would work best for their residents.

Several New Jersey communities have already achieved success through the campaign, particularly those that have had long-



Photo courtesy Christine B. Shesler

Residents take part in a 2005 winter walk in Madison, N.J.

time commitments to healthy lifestyles.

Metuchen, N.J., a town of about 12,000 led by Mayor Edmund O'Brien, has designed a number of walking trails that connect each of the neighborhood quadrants to Main Street.

"We have a lot of walkers in town — you see a lot of young couples and strollers," said Nancy Goldberg, recreation director.

Former New Jersey Gov. Jim Florio and his wife, Lucinda, who have both been named honorary co-chairs of the campaign, said that one of the reasons they chose to live in Metuchen was because of the opportunity for activity.

"Metuchen is the kind of town where families, couples and individuals can walk, bike and jog in safety," Lucinda Florio said in a news release June 15. "We take advantage of that nearly every evening."

Madison, N.J., under Mayor Ellwood "Woody" Kerkeslager, is the community that McDonald said has come the farthest under the state campaign. Kerkeslager, whose commitment to fitness stems from a life-long involvement in sports and physical activity, has begun a comprehensive survey of Madison's streets and sidewalks to assess the walking and biking options. The town of 16,000 has also partnered with the local YMCA to add a morning walk to its ongoing tradition of night walks, which are mapped out to be a few miles long.

"We've never done a walk at 7 a.m. before so I don't know how the turnout will be," said Christine Shesler, health educator in Madison's Department of Health. "But we've had good attendance at our night walks and monthly Saturday walks."

One of Kerkeslager's long-term goals is to further increase his town's commitment to walking.

"If we can get everyone walking to school, to downtown, to the theater, to the train station then we will create a community with a strong fitness orientation," Kerkeslager said.

In addition to improving health, Kerkeslager said that walking has other benefits, such as traffic reduction.

Kerkeslager has also set up monthly meetings with fitness-oriented representatives from throughout the community, including Drew and Fairleigh Dickinson universities, local public schools, the YMCA, and yoga and martial arts studios. The meetings serve to coordinate activities, especially the use of Madison's limited recreation spaces, and also "are a way of supporting each other," Kerkeslager said.

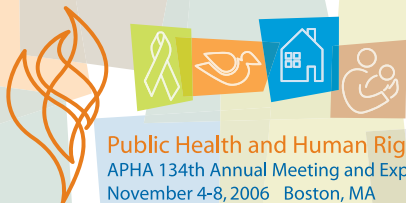
The campaign received a \$200,000 grant from the Aetna health care organization in 2005 and has received additional funding from Benecard Services, Inc., the New Jersey Department of Transportation and Johnson & Johnson.

"We've done everything to date at no cost to the communities," McDonald said, admitting that the campaign will eventually need a steady stream of income to continue.

If funding is strong, the campaign will move into a second round focusing on nutrition, probably in 2008, McDonald said. She also said she hopes that the campaign will someday become nationwide.

For more information on the Mayors Wellness Campaign, visit <www.mayorswellnesscampaign.org>. ■

— Leah Cowdrey



New CEI Just Added: Vulnerable Populations and Public Health Emergencies

APHA has just added an additional Continuing Education Institute (CEI) on public health emergencies, preparedness and vulnerable populations to the list of CEIs available at the Annual Meeting. The abstract and presenters for this CEI can be viewed in the online program. It will be held Saturday, Nov. 4, at 9 a.m. and will last six hours. Since it is a late addition to the program, participants must register online or on site. It is a timely topic and promises to be very popular. Register early to guarantee a seat. The session is 1013 and will be available for registration by June 16.



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