

Coalition gaining momentum in obesity battle

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Those working on their New Year's weight-loss goals know it takes hard work, learning and perseverance — and the results, though felt inside, take time before they appear in the mirror.

It's been a similar experience for a broad community coalition working to stem the tide of obesity in the region. Leaders of the Weight of the Fox Valley, a wide-ranging initiative launched two years ago, say they came to the challenge knowing there wouldn't be a simple solution, but rather a long-term journey toward a leaner, healthier community.

"It could take years, maybe a generation," program manager Keren Rosenberg said.

The community health initiative, which spans Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties, began in 2014 and is looking to make new strides in 2016 toward its goal of improving eating habits and sparking physical activity. Though it's too early to measure progress, the motivation to reduce obesity rates and establish health as a foremost community goal hasn't waned.

It's led by the Fox Cities and Oshkosh Area United Way organizations and involves members from the business community, government, schools, health systems and other nonprofits.

Leaders say the issue of obesity goes beyond diet and activity. It's affected by environment and the community culture.

Julia Salomón, dietitian for Affinity Health System and a member of the leadership team, said it's a quality-of-life issue. The initiative is an important turning point that's given the community an opportunity to talk about obesity rather than talk around it.

"It's in everybody's best interest to try to address this collaboratively and collectively," Salomón said, "This is not a finger pointing kind of effort. This is about asking, 'How can we help?'"

'We used to be there'

Leaders say obesity has affected happiness, lowered productivity and drained resources.



Wake Up for Wellness event at a Kimberly-Clark fitness center in Neenah. Community business leaders were invited to the event to draw attention to the need for more corporate wellness programs. (Photo: Danny Damiani/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

The United Way's 2011 Life Study found that 62 percent of Fox Valley residents were either overweight or obese. That figure had grown 3 percent from 2005.

The prevalence of adult obesity in Wisconsin climbed from nearly 12 percent in 1990 to about 31 percent in 2014, according to a report from the Trust for America's Health and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Excess weight is a contributor to major health issues including heart disease, diabetes and strokes.

Peter Kelly, president and CEO of United Way Fox Cities, said it's a matter of addressing what's changed to cause the rise in obesity.

"These aren't grand plans to do something we haven't done before," Kelly said. "We used to be there."

The Weight of the Fox Valley initiative was built on the idea that the many groups that worked individually on health and weight issues could have a greater impact through collaboration and a shared vision. The goal is to learn from each other, and from other communities that have had success, Kelly said.

This year, the coalition will work toward accurate and anonymous data collection from the three-county region as a means to track results.

Soon, they'll debut a link on their website offering recipes for healthy meals families could make for less than \$10, an alternative to unhealthy fast-food deals.

"We want to influence families at the point that it comes to their choices," Rosenberg said.

'I started to reclaim myself'

The Weight of the Fox Valley created action teams to address factors contributing to obesity and areas of promise.

There's an active communities team and a workplace team. Its food systems action team has worked on how healthy choices could be better promoted.

The initiative has worked to get wellness into the community mindset. The group established a pledge program, which asks residents to commit to simple and attainable goals, whether it's eating vegetables daily or taking 30-minute walks five times a week.

Its website has become a rich resource with healthy recipes and tips for achieving an active lifestyle. Visitors can send questions confidentially on active living and healthy eating and receive replies from experts in the region.

Earlier this month, Fox Valley business leaders gathered at Kimberly-Clark's fitness center for an early morning workout to draw attention to the need for more corporate wellness programs.

Last year's 12-week "Passport to Healthy Living" program offered residents the chance for prizes through tracking their physical activity. Participants could earn stamps by walking, hiking or jogging an area trail or walking path once a week; or logging at least 15 minutes of exercise three times a week.

Rosenberg said the hope was to give residents an incentive to start along a healthier path, and also highlight opportunities in the region. The Fox Valley, for instance, is home to beautiful trails, "but not enough people are using them."

Liz Vorpahl of Neenah attended the kickoff event at the Trestle Trail Bridge and said the program was just what she needed.

"I started to reclaim myself," she said

She had always found fitness important but fell out of good habits, then fell out of shape. She's regained a healthier weight, and credited the Weight of the Fox Valley program with helping to renew her motivation.

"It really moved my spirit," Vorpahl said. "I wanted something to jump-start me, and that really jump-started me."

Though the ultimate goal of the Weight of the Fox Valley sits on the grand scale, leaders say individual successes such as Vorpahl's have been inspiring — and a big source of community momentum.

The initiative has highlighted success stories monthly, and that's been the most popular area of its website, Rosenberg said.

'We're talking about health'

It's clear to leaders they've gotten the community talking and thinking, but they know it's not enough.

"It's still a big issue and we still have a lot to do," Rosenberg said.

Kurt Eggebrecht, Appleton's health officer and a member of the initiative's leadership team, sees parallels between the obesity fight and efforts to curb the prevalence of smoking. It didn't happen overnight.

He pointed to positive strides including greater attention in communities to pedestrians and cyclists. Success will require building an environment in which "the easy choice is the healthy choice," he said.

Salomón said a healthier community would have fewer vending machines and more fruit baskets. Residents would make better choices with the right information in front of them, such as calorie counts on menus.



Sandy Campbell performs lunges during the Weight of the Fox Valley's Wake Up for Wellness event earlier this month at a Kimberly-Clark fitness center in Neenah. (Photo: Danny Damiani/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

Achieving a healthier community includes the next generation.

Lee Allinger, superintendent of the Appleton Area School District, is part of the Weight of the Fox Valley. He said wellness programming has touched both staff and students in the district. Building successful adults means more than academics, and eating well and active living is part of the equation, he said.

Kelly said the initiative will remain flexible, and work to drive change in the most effective ways as the community learns.

"If we need to change, we will," he said.

Salomón said it's a daunting challenge, but a crucial one. The Fox Valley is fortunate to have strong partnerships that will provide the chance for meaningful change.

"Even though our focus is on obesity, we're talking about health," she said. "This isn't just about the number on the scale,"

On the web

To learn more about the Weight of the Fox Valley initiative, visit weightofthefoxvalley.org