Weight of the Fox Valley gaining support

Shane Nyman , USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 11:50 a.m. CT Feb. 14, 2017

APPLETON - Surveys have shown that upwards of 65 percent of New Year's resolutions fall apart in less than a month.

That means as we reach the mid-point of February, there likely are a lot of people in the Fox Valley who've already fallen off the path to bettering their health. But while those New Year's Day vows drift into history for some, efforts to get residents moving more and eating better continue to ramp up communitywide thanks to efforts of the ongoing Weight of the Fox Valley, a United Way-led effort that has garnered support from a bevy of local government bodies.

Since 2015, a dozen local governments have passed a resolution to keep the mission of Weight of the Fox Valley front of mind. The resolution means health and well-being will be taken into consideration with future infrastructure plans. The idea, then, is to continue to make the Fox Valley a place in full support of active residents.

"A big part of trying to make change at this level is getting support from the decision-makers and the influencers in our community," said Weight of the Fox Valley program manager Sarah Wright. " ... It really is an important step toward putting that down in writing and saying, OK, we agree we're all going to do this — now how do we move forward and do it together?"

The resolution — which refers to the local obesity issue as an "epidemic" — also pledges support for the East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission's bicycle and pedestrian plan.

Communities that have passed the resolution include Appleton, Neenah, Kaukauna, Menasha, Fox Crossing, Clayton, Grand Chute, Greenville, Sherwood, Harrison, Oshkosh and Calumet County.

Weight of the Fox Valley is a community health initiative within Outagamie, Calumet and Winnebago counties spearheaded by the United Way in the Fox Cities and Oshkosh. Launched in 2013, it brought together a coalition of hospitals and health care systems, governments, businesses, nonprofits and philanthropic organizations hoping to promote healthy eating and exercise.

Facing the problem

Studies have shown that more than 60 percent of Fox Valley residents are overweight or obese, which can lead to a variety of serious health problems including heart disease, cancer, diabetes and more. Excess weight can affect mental health and self-esteem, and in the long run, added health care costs.

"We, like the rest of the state and country, we're trending in the wrong direction," said Kurt Eggebrecht, Appleton's health officer and a member of the Weight of the Fox Valley leadership team.

The most recent health assessment survey found 31 percent of residents in the three counties were obese. Another 33 percent were considered overweight.

Over the course of 10 years — from 2005 to 2015 — the percentage of obese and overweight Fox Cities residents grew from 61 to 64 percent.

The numbers are based on body mass index, or BMI, which Eggebrecht said isn't a perfect system for measuring a single person but is seen as the "gold standard" for looking at a population. An adult's BMI is found using height and weight measurements and the results correlate with body fat.

An adult with a BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 is considered at normal weight. A BMI of between 25 and 29.9 is considered overweight and 30 or greater qualifies as obese.

The numbers for Outagamie, Calumet and Winnebago counties are similar to the country as a whole. In 2015, 30 percent of Americans were obese and 36 percent were overweight.

Finding solutions

Wright took over as program manager this year but has been involved in the project since its launch as a public health nurse with the Winnebago County Health Department. She said over that time a lot of positive work has been done in terms of relationship building and collaboration among different organizations.

And though the coalition has been around for about four years, this isn't the kind of work that nets immediate results. But the work must continue.

Eat Well for Less is one program that's come from the group. It gives shoppers at Festival Foods and Woodman's stores plans for complete meals for $3 or less per person. The meals are designed to be prepared in 30 minutes or less and comply with ThedaCare's nutritional guidelines.

Another big push in the early-goings has been data collection and organization. Weight of the Fox Valley leaders have worked with different groups from around the state to figure out how to best track the health of the public and then identify ways to help. The BMI data that's available, for instance, comes from phone surveys. Eventually the hope is to be able to use electronic medical records to get more accurate statistics.

The new commitment to integrating health into community planning from 12 local governments also means, in the long run, the Fox Valley should be a place more welcoming for walkers, runners, bikers and more.

Appleton alderman Joe Martin, who serves on one of the six action teams within Weight of the Fox Valley, said the local municipalities passing the resolution was important for the future. He said he's proud that Appleton was the first to take action, having done so in May 2015. (The last of the 12 governments passed the resolution in November.)

"We are an aging population. For the next 10, 20 years we have the baby boomers who might need to be out walking for medical reasons or they need to be biking for health reasons," said Martin, who also is part of the leadership team. "... These are put in place so we can be more of an active community, versus a community that's just sitting around."

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WEIGHT ISSUES AT A GLANCE

Fox Cities over the years

2015: 28 percent obese, 36 percent overweight (64 percent total)

2010: 28 percent obese, 34 percent overweight (62 percent total)

2005: 23 percent obese, 38 percent overweight (61 percent total)

Local vs. national

Fox Cities, 2015: 28 percent obese, 36 percent overweight (64 percent total)

Tri-County, 2015: 31 percent obese, 33 percent overweight (64 percent total)

Wisconsin, 2015: 31 percent obese, 35 percent overweight (66 percent total)

U.S., 2015: 30 percent obese, 36 percent overweight (66 percent total)

Sources: Fox Valley Regional Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, National Center for Disease Control