

# Expert: We have power to end childhood obesity

Jim Collar, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

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Jim Collar: 920-996-7206 or jcollar@postcrescent.com; on Twitter @JimCollar



(Photo: IPGGutenbergUKLtd, Getty Images/iStockphoto)

NEENAH - While childhood obesity is a complex and epidemic issue, communities have the power to reverse trends through collaboration, a nationally renowned nutrition expert said Tuesday.

Dr. Christina Economos, an associate professor at Tufts University, spoke to about 200 community members during a breakfast held by the Weight of the Fox Valley, a community health initiative spearheaded by the United Way in the Fox Cities and Oshkosh.

"Communities can come together, they can bond, they can create change," Economos said.

Economos watched it happen. She's been involved in a number successful efforts across the country to reduce weight and increase the health of children.

She led the "Shape Up Somerville" program in Massachusetts, which began in 2002 to determine whether community changes could prevent weight gain in children. The three-year study resulted in healthier weights among first- through third-graders targeted by the initiative.

The communitywide effort worked to increase physical activity among children as well as healthy eating. She's since been able to replicate the results elsewhere.

The message adds fuel to the fire for those leading the Weight of the Fox Valley movement, which is in its early stages. Keren Rosenberg, program manager for the initiative, said Economos' session provided a road map for the region to reach its goals.

"We have a start, but it's a long journey," Rosenberg said.

There's plenty of work to accomplish, here and elsewhere. About a third of children in the United States are overweight and almost half of those are obese.

In the simplest terms, it's an issue that comes down to energy, Economos said told the group.

"There's too much coming in and not enough coming out," she said.

Balancing the intake and output — eating and exercise — is where the work begins.

Contributors to childhood obesity include consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and low-cost, calorie-dense foods. Portion sizes have grown and children are heavily influenced by food advertising directed toward the young, Economos said. Students aren't receiving adequate education on nutrition and parents frequently don't have a good understanding of the issue.

Children should get 60 minutes of at least moderate physical activity a day, though by age 12, less than 10 percent of kids reach that benchmark, Economos said. Physical education and recess time at school has decreased. The amount of time spent in front of televisions, phones and computers has grown.

"It's all day, all of the time and sometimes multiple devices at the same time," she said.

Economos is co-founder and director of the organization, ChildObesity180, which has worked to instill a sense of urgency regarding childhood obesity and is working toward solutions.



Dr. Christina Economos (Photo: Jim Collar/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

Their efforts included a study that showed restaurants can grow revenue by including healthier options for children, and families will choose those options if they're made available.

She recommended schools create wellness policies that addresses topics including nutrition education and providing physical activity outside of gym class. The policies should include a means of measurement and accountability.

"What's measured gets done," she said.

The Weight of the Fox Valley initiative spans Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties. It's led by the Fox Cities and Oshkosh Area United Way organization, and is made up of leaders from business, government, schools, health systems and other nonprofits.

Attendees at Tuesday's breakfast, held at Neenah's Best Western Bridgewood Conference Center, included concerned parents, business leaders, educators and members of the health care community.

Economos said parents have a role. Health care professionals have a role. Before- and after-school programs contribute to success. Even shifting a child's balance by 150 calories per day makes a big difference.

"If you can make some small changes, it will actually go a long way," she said.