

Initiative Addresses Groups with Health Disparities

A program encouraging physical activity has led to a dramatic increase in park use



Citizens may take the fantastic programs and services park and recreation agencies provide for granted as well as the beautiful parks, trails and pathways they manage. It's important to educate the public on the relevant role park and recreation agencies play in providing healthy opportunities.

Start Your Heart

The Sarasota County (FL) Parks and Recreation Start Your Heart initiative began in early 2005 as a way to get people motivated about physical activity and weight loss. The participants engage in activities of their choosing and their progress is charted by Parks and Recreation program staff.

Sarasota County Parks and Recreation has been able to enhance its community partnerships between agencies and share resources to bring residents healthful opportunities. A recent partnership has been formed between the parks department and the Sarasota Chapter of United Cerebral Palsy. United Cerebral Palsy approached the agency looking for a program or resources that could enable them to give their clients a new recreation experience that they could engage in at least once per week. With Start Your Heart, Cerebral Palsy participants are able to set personal goals and the earned incentives are enthusiastically received.

Program Success and Expansion

Start Your Heart registration cards record body mass index, blood pressure, body fat, height, and weight and participants are encouraged to update the cards regularly. These statistics are then used by park staff for evaluation purposes. Since the program was initiated, its popularity has increased dramatically. One park in the program has three participants that have logged more than 1,000 miles. Another park boasts a 46% increase in participation during the past year. Sarasota County Parks and Recreation is in the process of adding five new Start Your Heart locations at various parks within the county.

Intervention for Diabetes Management

In addition to the Start Your Heart Program, Laurel Park in southern Sarasota County hosts a Community Health Action Team or CHAT. A group of health conscience individuals meet monthly to study local health issues, learn from local health experts, and develop projects aimed at solving community-level health problems. Laurel Park CHAT has tackled the problem of Type II Diabetes by partnering with the University of South Florida. Sixty-six people enrolled in a program aimed at helping them better manage the disease. The intervention group received information on community resources, self-management and self-care techniques, and general diabetes information. A three month follow-up showed an average drop in hemoglobin A1c of .7% (a significant difference from the control group).



An exciting new partnership has developed recently between Sarasota County Parks and Recreation and the Department of Health. They are currently working to integrate Start Your Heart with the DOH's 'Step Up Florida' and 'Pathways to Health' programs. DOH will provide trail signage, limited funding, and promotions for the Parks and Recreation Department. The Department will in turn register participants, track participant's progress, and maintain the database. The ultimate goal is to reach more audiences and provide even more recreation opportunities to participants.

Agency contact: Carissa Potts, Program Coordinator, cpotts@scgov.net

"My yearly physical brought my health to the top of my priority list. The Start Your Heart program provided me the means I needed to set personal goals and incorporate exercise into my busy lifestyle. In the first few months of the program I noticed a difference not only in my physical well-being but also in my emotional well-being. I'm a happier person. The Start Your Heart program did that for me."

Brad Deavox 25, Start Your Heart Participant

NRPA PERFORMANCE EXCELLENCE RATING: Key Factors for Success



People
Internal staff



Partnerships
Department of health, university, medical community



Programs & Services
Physical activity focused



Public Visibility
Public presentations, articles



Places & Spaces
Trail signage



Performance Measures
Pre and post evaluations



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