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Starting a food fight at the grass roots



Ernie Mastroianni

Stephanie Sandy (center) leads a yoga class at Alice's Garden in Milwaukee. The garden works to bring people together in making healthy eating choices, a mission shared by several other area groups.

With state's obesity rate at 26%, area groups work for healthy choices

By [Karen Herzog](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Two summers ago, north side residents protested a proposed fried chicken restaurant, calling its high-calorie offerings a health hazard to a neighborhood already saturated with fast food.

Church's Chicken eventually abandoned plans for what would have been the third fried chicken restaurant in a 10-block stretch of North Ave.

It was a watershed moment in a movement to create healthy choices in the predominantly African-American neighborhood at a time when obesity was becoming a major public health issue nationwide.

A new report released Tuesday by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention validates the neighborhood's ongoing efforts, as Wisconsin's overall obesity rate for adults hovers at 26%.

Recent estimates of the annual medical costs of obesity are as high as \$147 billion. On average, that amounts to \$1,429 in higher costs each year for people who are obese than for those of normal weight, according to the CDC report.

About 72.5 million U.S. adults are now considered obese - roughly 20% or more over ideal body weight - a condition that contributes to several leading causes of death, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some types of cancer. Just in the past two years, the number has increased by 2.4 million adults, according to 2009 data collected by state health departments for the CDC through 400,000 phone surveys nationwide.

Wisconsin has the highest rate of obesity in the nation among African-Americans (44%), compared with whites (26%) and Latinos (25%), according to another report released last month by the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Obesity is a complex issue, and no single strategy to reduce it has been effective, the CDC noted in its report.

An approach involving all levels of government, the medical community, neighborhood groups and schools is needed, the CDC's director, Thomas Frieden, told reporters in a teleconference.

"Obesity is a societal problem, and it will take a societal response," Frieden said.

The solution lies in communities becoming places where healthy eating and active living "are the easiest path," according to the CDC.

Better choices

In Milwaukee, progress is visible in grass-roots efforts to promote healthier eating and exercise in neighborhoods where good choices haven't always been readily available.

Will Allen, founder and CEO of the urban Milwaukee farm Growing Power, speaks of "food deserts" in low-income neighborhoods, where healthy fruits and vegetables aren't affordable or easily accessible to those without cars.

Nutritious food tends to be more expensive. Milk costs more than twice as much as a 2-liter bottle of soda; fresh vegetables are pricier than high-calorie, processed convenience foods. Many neighborhood corner stores don't stock fresh produce because they can't buy a small amount to price reasonably. The food distribution system encourages packaged foods with a longer shelf life.

One solution being explored is to work with owners of corner stores interested in stocking vegetables grown by local farmers, said Young Kim, executive director of the Fondy Food Center, which runs the Fondy Farmers Market at 2200 W. Fond du Lac Ave.

Once corner stores are identified, neighbors will be surveyed to determine what fresh produce they would be willing to buy, Kim said.

Community gardens, cooking clubs, yoga and walking groups, a mobile market offering a full line of nutritious food at lower prices, and a program that offers "market baskets" of fresh fruits and vegetables all aim at take a bite out of obesity in this neighborhood and others.

Those leading the movement live in the neighborhoods.

"The key here is it's not being done *for* the community, but *by* the community," said Linda Meurer, a physician and associate professor of family and community medicine at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

The college is an advisory partner for the Lindsay Heights Neighborhood Health Initiative, which includes the Johnson Park and Walnut Way neighborhoods, where the Church's Chicken protest occurred two summers ago.

The [Health Alliance](#) formed last year, and includes more than 20 neighborhood associations, community-based organizations and academic representatives.

The Walnut Way Conservation Corp. - a neighborhood improvement group that coordinates community vegetable gardening and supports the Fondy Farmers Market - leads the Neighborhood Initiative for Lindsay Heights, which includes 2,700 households.

"In our 110-block area, being responsible for our health has become a priority," said Sharon Adams, who, with husband, Larry Adams, co-founded Walnut Way Conservation Corp. with neighbors in 2002.

Neighbors walk together for exercise each week and participate in other "Get Up and Get Moving" activities advertised in monthly community fliers, Sharon Adams said. The Medical College and University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health are involved.

Adams likened the walking group to pick-up basketball, a social activity that happens through word-of-mouth.

"I like the consistency and the variety of activities we have in the neighborhood," Adams said. "It's good information and not preaching. It's a wonderful, contagious energy."

Healthy cooking

Alice's Garden, at W. Garfield Ave. and N. 20th St., is a thriving example of community bonding over nutritious food.

A healthy cooking club grows its own vegetables at the garden and meets there on Tuesday nights in summer to learn how to cook what they produce. A yoga group meets at the edge of the garden to practice yoga.

One aim of the cooking club coordinated by Kimberly Njoroge, a community food specialist for the Fondy Food Center, is to give traditional, high-fat family recipes a healthful makeover. The class encourages residents to share recipes, and promotes portion control and family meals.

"If they have more social support, they're more likely to be healthy," said Meurer, the physician. "The ultimate success is people are feeling more networked with each other around healthy activities."

Good health is achieved one choice at a time.

One recent Tuesday night at the garden, given the choice between an orange-pineapple juice drink packing 44

grams of sugar and a mint-lemon balm herbal tea sweetened with local honey, Mohamed Mohamed, 14, drank the tea and didn't open the juice he brought to the garden, where he was helping pull weeds with his friend, Abdi Baba, 13.

For those not interested in growing their own food, two programs offer fresh produce at an affordable price and distribute it at central locations in neighborhoods underserved by traditional grocery stores.

SHARE, a nonprofit, volunteer-run food-buying club, offers a 30% to 50% savings on supermarket quality food.

SHARE's [Mobile Market program](#), has a growing presence, making monthly deliveries to about 20 sites in north, south and east side neighborhoods.

One recent afternoon, the mobile market offered organic carrots for 25 cents a bag, five oranges for \$1, and a bag of potatoes for 50 cents. Olive oil was a big seller at \$3.50 for 17 ounces.

Ann Wilson, manager for the Hillside Resource Center, 1452 N. 7th St., bought fresh vegetables for her two grandchildren and four great-grandchildren when the Mobile Market came to the center.

"My grandson picked out the carrots on his own," she noted. "When children have good choices, they will make them."

Growing Power has a Market Basket program that offers weekly bags of fresh fruits and vegetables at below-market prices year-round through a network of 350 small farms around the country.

The program began in 1995 and has grown to include 75 to 100 drop-off sites throughout the metropolitan area, not just the central city. Each \$16 Market Basket - a brown paper shopping bag - is filled with sufficient vegetables and fruit to feed a family of four for a week. Growing Power distributes about 300 baskets each week during the summer and 600 to 700 baskets during the school year, according to program coordinator Karen Parker.

The \$16 bag of produce would cost more than \$30 in a grocery store.

72.5 million

Number of U.S. adults

considered obese

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Obesity rate for Wisconsin

\$147 billion

Estimate of the annual

medical costs of obesity

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