



Title: “Free and Low Cost Physical Activity For All”

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Introduction

San Mateo County (SMC), with a population of 758,851 people, is cradled amongst San Francisco, Napa, Oakland, and Silicon Valley (the metro region known as “Bay Area”).ⁱ Physical inactivity is one of several factors that are driving obesity rates in the U.S. and particularly in SMC. 55.4% of SMC adults is overweight, up from 50.8% in 1998ⁱⁱ. Obesity rates increased from 13.4% in 1998 to 21.7% in 2013. Not only are 54% of SMC adults physically inactive, SMC children are also physically unfit with only 36.2% of 7th graders passing the physical fitness requirements. SMC’s built environment is partly responsible for the inactive population: 21.8% of SMC adults felt that their local cities are not doing a good job creating bikeable and walkable streets and sidewalks. Physicians also feel that there are inadequate resources to address unhealthy lifestyles: 75% of physicians surveyed wished that they could prescribe fitness programs for their clientsⁱⁱⁱ. These alarming statistics led a group of staff at San Mateo County Health System to create a group called Active Access (formerly known as ACTIVE Communities Together) in 2009 whose goal is to promote accessible and affordable physical activity for everyone in SMC.

Methods

In 2009, a group of Stanford University medical students surveyed older adults in SMC to understand their barriers to exercise, such as lack of available programs and facilities, poor quality programs and facilities, and lack of knowledge about programs and the benefits of the program.^{iv} Other barriers included the high costs of programs and environmental barriers, such as accessibility to registration and transportation. Physically inactive adults preferred classes that were affordable, facilitated, one-time opportunities and available for drop-in. They recommended collaborations between key stakeholders of physical activity promotion in the fields of health, wellness, recreation, and community advocacy.

Healthcare agencies, Parks and Recreation (PR), local government, and community members in SMC united as a collaborative to promote physical activity. Active Access’ mission is “to promote healthy physical activity in community places throughout San Mateo County”. The three pillars of Active Access are to: 1) improve SMC residents’ physical and mental health, 2) activate the use of public space, and 3) enhance social connectedness. Active Access meets quarterly and communicates primarily through a listserv, which is maintained by a Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention staff of San Mateo County Health System. The collaborative uses a democratic approach to selecting activities and events it wants to pursue. Members contribute their time and resources to help plan and implement activities with the goal of improving residents’ access to physical activities where they lived or worked.

Results

Active Access’ earliest efforts included streamlining free and low cost PA resources within SMC into one web-based database. These resources cost \$5 or less per class/event and the resources are listed by the city in which they occur. Each resource includes information about its cost, location, date and time of class/event, the age group it targets, and a brief description of the class/event. The website attracts 98-134 users per month for PA resources and browses the website for an average of 2 minutes and 36 seconds. At a future time and with additional funding, the database will include search filters that will allow users to search for activities within specific categories (e.g., Zumba, Children).

Active Access also engages with communities by participating in various events. In 2013, Parks & Recreation members from Foster City, Belmont, Burlingame and Daly City were hosting city-wide events and decided to share their resources and promoted each other’s events. Free physical activity demonstrations were offered at each event while Active Access distributed incentives and flyers about its web-based database.

Since 2014, Active Access has been hosting free evidence-based Go4Life® workshops, a training of trainers on leading fitness for older adults and adults with disabilities. This free workshop is made possible by one of the Active Access members who volunteers her time to teach the Go4Life workshop and teaches them how to modify fitness activities for older adults and adults with disabilities. The Go4Life® workshops resulted in senior centers and community members leading fitness classes for older adults. Some of the trainees were already fitness instructors who modified Go4Life® exercises into their existing classes, whereas others aspired to lead classes for their own community members or to become instructors at facilities. Twenty-three people have participated since 2014.

This year's project involves partnering with local Parks & Recreations (some of whom are Active Access members) to implement a park-based PA campaign that is interactive and family-friendly. Passport to Parks is similar to geocaching, which involves planting series of clues at various parks within walking distance. The goal is to use any mode of active transportation, such as walking, biking, wheeling and skating while following the clues. The clues are bilingual and appropriate for families with children. Prizes are used to incentivize participants to complete surveys that would help inform Active Access and Parks & Recreations about the success of Passport to Parks as well as the demographics of the audience it attracted. As of October 2015, 36 adults and 20 children have participated in Passport to Parks.

Discussion

The importance of physical activity is gaining more attention as the economic, health and social burden of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic diseases increases. Providers, residents and communities realize that they cannot maintain a healthy lifestyle without physical activity. Availability and accessibility of physical activity resources alone are not enough to improve residents' access to physical activity; affordability is also a critical factor. Active Access continues to work with its members to promote physical activity classes and events that are affordable to low-income communities. However, given the rapidly increasing costs of living in the Bay Area, Parks & Recreations and other facilities felt the pressure to keep up with inflation. This challenge resulted in fewer listings on our web-based database.

Active Access' current efforts include identifying opportunities for residents to engage in physical activities within public spaces that are free and low cost. Passport to Parks is its first effort to widely promote and engage residents in physical activity within public parks. Active Access hopes to create a prescription program that will allow local health providers to refer sedentary clients to a list of physical activity classes that are approved and sponsored by Active Access members. This not only helps to generate more attraction and profits for the local parks and facilities, it allows physicians to provide a more definitive "treatment plan" that can be tailored to their sedentary clients' preferences based on location, time, and type of activity.

The diverse nature of Active Access allows the group to maximize the resources that are available to the members while providing a greater reach within SMC. Given the state of the economy since its incipience and the rapidly increasing costs of living, this type of collaboration helped minimize excessive organizational and fringe costs and encouraged members to coordinate efforts instead of duplicating each other's efforts. Future steps include expanding its partnerships to include one of the County Supervisors, privately-owned parks, county parks, active transportation planners and recreation facilities. While many entities are committed to promoting physical activity, more collaborations and support are necessary to ensure that physical activity remains affordable and accessible to all.

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ⁱ U.S. Census Bureau. (2014). *People Quickfacts*. Retrieved from: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06081.html>.

ⁱⁱ The Healthy Community Collaborative of San Mateo County. (2013). *Community Health Needs Assessment: Health & quality of life in San Mateo County*. Retrieved from: <http://smchealth.org/sites/default/files/docs/HPP/2013FullReport%28low%29.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2011). *Health care's blind side: the overlooked connection between social needs and good health (summary of findings from a survey of America's physicians)*. Retrieved from: http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/surveys_and_polls/2011/rwjf71795.

^{iv} Ahmed, S., Badowski, N., Leroux, E., Seligman, B., Smedra, B., Theis, M., & Valentine, A. (2009). *Assessing the health benefits of physical activity programs for older adults in San Mateo County (an internship project)*. San Mateo County Health System: Family Health Services.