

Grassroots Snapshot

Moms' walking group leads push for a walkable neighborhood

BY AQUEILA M. LEWIS

Two years ago, Bakersfield mothers Gema Perez and Leticia Encima were part of a nutrition class at the Greenfield Family Resource Center. "We learned about eating sugar and fat, how to choose better meats, and to try to eat more fruits and vegetables," Encima recalls. They also learned, says Perez, "that walking was good for us."

So class participants decided to take the next step. With support from the Kern County Obesity Prevention Task Force, they formed the Greenfield Walking Group—and ended up making their neighborhood more "walkable" for everybody.

Stepping out

In October 2006, 25 moms started walking every day in Steirn Park. But they encountered obstacles: aggressive dogs that lunged at walkers as they pushed their children in strollers, hypodermic needles, condoms, broken bottles, broken lights, graffiti, and drug and gang activity. To get to the park they had to cross four lanes of rapidly moving traffic.

At this point, the moms met Jennifer Lopez, healthy living outreach facilitator at Get Moving Kern and Network for Children. Lopez helped them figure out how to take action to make their community more "walkable" so residents could get more exercise.

Walkability assessment

One day last March, the Walking Group held a "Walkability Assessment" of their neighborhood.

- Group members went door to door inviting people to participate.
- They also invited representatives from city agencies including police, maintenance, parks and recreation, and animal control.
- On the day of the assessment, neighbors and officials toured the neighborhood together, mapping problem spots.
- They then sat down to talk. "Residents got to tell their stories and city officials explained the best ways to get things done," says Lopez.

"None of us had ever done anything like this before," Encima recalls. "And there were problems," such as persuading city agencies to participate. The solution, says Perez, was "to try again and not let (ourselves) be defeated."

Seeing results

Perez and Encima say the Greenfield Walking Group has brought about many positive changes. "My cholesterol



The Greenfield Walking group in action

is lower, my blood circulation is better, and also my self-esteem. And I have many friendships," says Perez.

"My depression and my weight have improved," Encima says. "Now my family is more motivated and we try to eat better—and the community is safer and cleaner."

In Steirn Park, the broken lights have been replaced, graffiti and dogs removed. Police surveillance and maintenance efforts have increased. And now the members of the walking group have learned the numbers to call and people to talk to if further problems arise.

Ripple effect

The Greenfield Walking Group—now up to 60 members—has been providing assistance to groups who want to increase "walkability" in other cities, including Delano and Davis. California Walks, a pedestrian advocacy organization, is using the Greenfield group as a model, and a fotonovela on the group will be distributed throughout the Central Valley. The group will soon be highlighted as a model for change by a major national foundation.

For more info:

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The Kern County Obesity Prevention Task Force is a project of the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program, sponsored by The California Endowment