

Obesity plan looks at where we reside

By Farin Montañez / The Fresno Bee

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It's no use telling Central Valley residents to eat healthy and exercise if they live in unsafe neighborhoods with limited access to grocery stores that sell fruits and vegetables.

That was the message delivered by Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program officials as they announced their obesity prevention plan at a news conference Wednesday.

The plan focuses on two health aspects: eating better and moving more, said the program's coordinator, Genoveva Islas-Hooker.

But instead of targeting individuals, the program will push for policy changes that will promote a safe environment to exercise in and easy access to healthy foods, Islas-Hooker said.

It is very hard for people to change their habits if their environment doesn't help them, said Jennifer Lopez, a leader for Get Moving Kern. For example, she said, one group of people in Kern County ran into several obstacles when they tried to organize a fitness walking club.

"They were faced with a pack of wild dogs," Lopez said. "They were stepping on hypodermic needles ... and there had been an attempted kidnapping in the area."

Program organizers plan to push for neighborhood watch programs and crime prevention to promote safe neighborhoods, and also access to farmers markets, community gardens and grocery stores rather than fast-food restaurants and convenience stores, Islas-Hooker said.

"These changes will make it easier for people to make healthier choices and live better lifestyles," she said.

The three-year initiative, which was launched in January 2006 with a \$2.6 million award from the California Endowment, will apply its plan to Fresno, Kern, Kings, Merced, Madera and Tulare counties.

Obesity rates in these counties are higher than the state average and much higher than the national Healthy People 2010 goals -- a set of health objectives published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services -- said Dr. John Capitman, director of the Central Valley Health Policy Institute.

About 32% of children younger than 12 in the Valley are overweight or obese, more than six times the national goal of 5%. And 65% of the Valley's adults are overweight or obese, more than four times the national goal of 15%, Capitman said.

The Valley can follow the example of communities that have been successful in dropping the pounds and living healthy lifestyles, but it will be a long and slow process, Capitman said.

"It has been done in college towns in the Midwest," he said. "But not in a big, complicated city like Fresno or a whole region like the Valley."

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