



NYS HEALTH
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Catholic Charities of Onondaga County's

KIDS WIN! Child Health Project for Obesity Prevention

Grant Results Report – July, 2008

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Catholic Charities of Onondaga County

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ABOUT THE GRANTEE

For more than 80 years, Catholic Charities of Onondaga County has served the most vulnerable families and children in central New York State. Catholic Charities' continuum of services touches all ages and stages of life, from adoption assistance to services for the elderly. The organization operates shelters for the homeless, serves meals to the hungry, and offers a vast array of programs and support services.

Kids WIN! Child Health Project for Obesity Prevention

THE PROBLEM ADDRESSED

Obesity in young people is an epidemic in the United States. One child in five is overweight, twice as many as 20 years ago. The increase has occurred in all age, race, and gender groups. The causes for children are the same as those for adults—eating too much and moving around too little. If children don't have after-school and summer activities to engage them, they readily turn to television, video games, and other media. Youths ages 8 to 18 spend an average of three hours with media each day, according to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Structured programs that encourage physical activity and teach youths about making healthy eating choices can help prevent obesity.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

Catholic Charities of Onondaga County has a long-term commitment to improving the health and well-being of school-age children and youth (ages five through 18) by engaging them in an after-school and summer program called Kids WIN! The program's 32-member advisory board includes local leaders—the chief of police, the school superintendent, physicians, CEOs of local businesses, and university professors—who work together in a community partnership aimed at helping young people achieve their greatest potential. The multi-year program, which operates in five inner-city Syracuse neighborhood centers, provides activities that are fun and information to help shape children's understanding, choices, and behavior related to nutrition and fitness.

UNDER THE GRANT

Kids WIN staff members worked to implement nutrition and physical activity curriculum to their existing after-school and summer programs in the five community centers, providing two hours of curriculum weekly at each site. The centers all have been in existence for many years, and their staff has positive relationships with local residents.

The coordinators conducted workshops open to parents, teachers, health care professionals, youth workers, coaches, and volunteers on how to motivate children and teens to create healthy lifestyles.

Kids WIN! engaged more than 1,000 children in four, eight-week after-school sessions that taught them about the food pyramid and proper meal portions, how to read and understand nutrition labels on foods they typically consume, and how to identify healthy snack choices. They also learned about fresh foods, healthy snacks, and cooking by participating in field trips to area farms, stores, and restaurants.

The summer 2007 activity schedule suggests the range of activities offered: Shove Park field trip, community garden creation, Big Don's Adventures, Sky Chiefs baseball game, field trip to food co-op and Lexington Market, Green Lakes fitness field trip, Healthy Family Field Day, and Summer Wellness Clinic. Some specific program initiatives:

- **The community garden project** taught the kids how to plant seeds and what it takes to make a garden grow. At harvest time, they ate the fruits of their labor. "The typical corner store offers only chips and sugary drinks, so many of these kids don't have access to fresh produce," says Tonya Roloson, project coordinator for Kids WIN! "The garden was a success, and it is sustainable."
- **The importance of exercise** was stressed, with the goal of achieving the public health recommendation of 60 minutes of physical activity a day. Kids were encouraged to participate in group aerobic activities, such as walking, cycling, dancing, and gardening. Each child created personal fitness goals and kept a regular activity log.
- **Syracuse University's Athletics Department** engaged the university's coaches, teams, and individual athletes in a public commitment to improve the lives of Syracuse youth, spending time at the community centers to help motivate the young people to achieve their personal goals.
- **Kirby Dar Dar Football Camp** was "hugely popular," according to Roloson. Led by the Syracuse University running back who later played for the Miami

Dolphins, this free one-day camp held in a city park had 100 attendees in 2007. It was enlarged to two days in 2008, and 200 kids participated. In addition to football and fitness instruction, Dar Dar uses the camp as an opportunity to teach kids the importance of academics, nutrition, and community service. “The only prerequisite is a C average or better in school,” says Roloson.

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVEMENT AND CHANGES TO ORIGINAL WORK PLAN

The community centers where the project was conducted have an “open door policy,” which means that youths can come and go as they please; those who begin a session may not necessarily complete it. Thus, not all children receive all the potential program benefits.

PROGRAM RESULTS

Project staff conducted pre-program and post-program surveys for each of the four eight-week sessions. The surveys asked participants ages five to 18 questions about their overall health, physical activity, and nutrition. Early trends from these surveys suggest that the new curriculum positively impacted the health of participants. For example, survey data indicate that participants felt “awesome,” drank more water rather than soda, and could identify a picture of the food pyramid at the end of the program. More children reported, however, that they did not consume the recommended five fruits and vegetables per day at the end of the program.

Interpretation of these results is limited by several factors: the children and youths volunteered to be surveyed; the same individuals did not necessarily take both tests; the varying lengths of time in and out of the program mean that different children received different “doses” of the intervention; and, finally, few refugee children with language barriers took either survey. As a result, rather than indicating definitive results for *individual children*, this information suggests changes in awareness of fitness and nutrition issues across the *population served*.

DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS

Program staff periodically published a Kids WIN! newsletter to promote the program's various initiatives and publicize fund-raising drives.

THE FUTURE

All of the community gardens will continue “to provide opportunities for fresh produce, and serve as educational tools for children,” says Roloson.

The project coordinator trained additional staff members on ways to help children reach their nutrition and fitness goals. She purchased and assembled fitness kits—large duffel bags that can be easily stored, transported, and used by staff—and instructional binders with a list of activities. For example, with 10 jump ropes, five stop watches, and two whistles easily at hand, a staff member has all materials needed to lead a game called “jump rope challenge.”

“We have lots of volunteers and staff turnover. These kits make it easy for staff to organize the fitness activities we know our kids enjoy,” says Roloson. “We have made fitness and nutrition an ongoing, integral part of the five centers' daily after-school activities.”