

It Takes a Community to Promote an Obesity and Wellness Program

Program Description: Obesity and overweight are serious, multi-factorial health problems facing many University City residents. The conditions decrease the quality of life and contribute to numerous adverse health outcomes, including chronic diseases. Excess weight increases an individual's risk of developing type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, some cancers, and stroke. Negative health consequences of the conditions have economic costs estimated at nearly \$150 billion annually. For that reason, a coalition of University City educators, elected officials, health professionals, and religious and business leaders are launching a program to make our community healthier and improve the quality of life for all of its residents. We know many of our citizens may be at higher risk. A greater percentage of African Americans are more likely to be obese or overweight compared to other races. Given the prevalence of obesity in our community and in Missouri, 1 of only 9 states where more than 30% of all residents are classified as obese, University City will develop a 5-year obesity reduction and physical activity promotion program for the entire community. The effort will involve the University City School District, the city's many churches and faith-based institutions, research partnerships with Washington University's Medical School, all of city government, and the business community.

Background on University City, Mo.: I grew up in this community. It is an urban municipality just east of St. Louis. It incorporates a wide spectrum of incomes, from the poverty level to upper middle-class. Washington University, one of the wealthiest privately endowed universities in the United States, lies partially within the city's boundaries. It has major medical programs (medical and physical therapy schools) and is the largest—and non-tax-paying—property owner in the city. The community experienced a so-called “white flight” during the 1970s that saw an exodus of many white and many middle-aged Jewish residents (the city has a strong Jewish heritage and many orthodox residents still) and an influx of African American residents from the city of St. Louis. Many Catholic families (black and white) in the city have their children educated in religious schools. The school district consists of 7 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and a high school. The city's businesses are mostly professional services, commercial/retail, and light industrial. One-seventh of the city lives below the poverty level. The population (37,000+) is mostly two races: white (50%) and African-American (44%). However, the school district is majority African-American, and has been since the 1970s. Two of the city's most famous former residents are the rap artist Nelly and playwright Tennessee Williams. The city has long prided itself as a diverse community that promotes community partnerships. Chuck Berry infrequently still plays gigs in University City at one of the St. Louis area's most famous clubs, Blueberry Hill.

Goal 1: Create a sustainable and uniquely University City culture that promotes regular physical activity for young people, families, and seniors.

Objective 1. (Process Objective): Pass city-wide bond measure within the first year of the plan that dedicates a 5-year funding stream to safeguard current funding levels for the operation of the city's parks, athletics programs, and recreation facilities and that funds the hiring of 10 additional staff to run new afterschool and evening activity programs for young people, adults, and seniors.

Objective 2. (Outcome Objective): By the end of year 5, reduce the number of high school and middle school age students who are obese or overweight by 8%, as measured by the use of YRBSS instruments done annually for high school and middle age school students.

Objective 3. (Process Objective): By the end of year 2, all public elementary schools and private/religious elementary schools will have implemented Safe Routes to School plans that include walkability audits, bicycle training for students by certified instructors, and collaborative planning with city engineering and public safety personnel to improve the immediate built environments around each school to encourage active transportation by students.

Objective 4. (Process Objective): By the end of year 2, complete city-wide walking guide (5,000 print run and web page) to parks showing walking routes to closest parks from all neighborhoods and citywide bike master plan (for web page and to be shared at library, community centers, and senior facilities) following public scoping and consultation process.

Objective 5. (Process Objective): By year 1, have developed plans for five physical activity themed community events targeting different age and social demographics that would use city-owned recreation facilities and parks. (Examples include: 3-on-3 hoops tournament for 18 and under males during July at Heman Park community center; local business-sponsored, family-oriented "bike around U. City Sunday" outings in April and May; local business-sponsored father and daughter softball tournament world series on Labor Day Weekend in Heman Park.)

Objective 6. (Process Objective): By the end of year 1, hold 6 community meetings with the University City Police Department and neighborhood groups to discuss ways to improve community policing efforts, with the goal of developing better trust between residents and the department and a 25% reduction in personal and property crimes by the end of year 2 (safer neighborhoods and parks will encourage more physical activity by many residents, including those 12 and younger and seniors).

Goal 2: Improve the dietary habits and nutritional knowledge of University City residents that results in better nutrition for all residents.

Objective 1. (Process Objective): By the end of year 2, develop school district-wide nutrition strategic plan to recommend any changes to school food services that ensure compliance with the

USDA's School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children (SMI) and best evidenced-based practices for serving of school meals that encourage daily recommended intake of 5 fruits and vegetables.

Objective 2. (Outcome Objective): By the end of year 3, develop curricula and education training guidelines for school faculty and teachers to integrate nutritional education lesson plans at the grade school level (grade 5) and mandatory health education course that includes nutritional education (high school level), such that every graduating student from the University City public school system within 5 years of the start of the program will have had a best-practice-based nutritional education.

Objective 3. (Outcome Objective): By year 4, increase by 50 percent the number of all high school and middle age school students who report they are consuming fruits and vegetables at least 5 times a day, as measured by YRBSS, to be taken annually at the city's two middle schools and the high school.

Objective 4. (Process Objective): By the end of year 3, develop healthy eating social marketing campaign that promotes University City-brand, community-based programs to promote greater nutritional awareness (of portion sizes, interpreting labels, cooking and recipes, gardening and community gardening, the Market in the Loop farmer's market) among parents and adults.

Objective 5. (Outcome Objective): Within 5 years, record 25% increase in the number of adult residents of University City who report they are consuming at least five fruits and vegetables a day and record a 25% reduction in the number of times per month a family or individual reports eating dinner out at a fast food franchise, as measured by an annual citywide telephone health and wellness survey to be developed in collaboration with Washington University and certified dietitian from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services.

Objective 6. (Process Objective): By the end of year 5, establish at least 10 community gardens in 5 different neighborhoods of University City on either city, church/religious, or school district owned property, and have those gardens prominently promoted with signage that identifies community ownership and the University City health and wellness brand.

Discussion: The social ecological model for health promotion suggests that interventions programs designed using multidisciplinary perspectives and across different levels (downstream, midstream, upstream) are more likely to have stronger measurable outcomes and greater social validity. Clearly, a community level program alone in University City will not work without efforts targeting individuals and especially without working further upriver, where state or even federal policy initiatives can impact funding support for programs like WIC and school-based lunches that are important to the nutritional needs of many city residents. It is doubtful the coalition has the reach to impact those upstream initiatives directly. But, existing opportunities for the community to access fresh fruits and vegetables, at the long running Market in the Loop in the city's downtown, can be strengthened by a program with merchants at the market and

social service agencies to promote the use of Electronic Benefit Transfer (federal supplemental nutrition program) point of purchase machines by those merchants.

My community-specific plan borrows from the community readiness to change health belief model, which draws upon the transtheoretical model about readiness to change personal behaviors individually. In this case, all members of the community cannot be expected to be willing or able to change behaviors and dietary habits. Clearly members of the community are aware of the prevalence of obesity and overweight. But the community will need to move from vague awareness to preplanning for change, initiation, and ideally stabilizing and expanding activities as more activities become accepted and relevant for different members of the community over the 5-year length of the program. University City will not become Eugene, Ore., but it can develop its own health identity that has “stickiness,” as described by Malcolm Gladwell.

University City's identity is strongly rooted in its institutions (churches, religious organizations), schools, traditions (annual events), and the built environment (parks, transportation systems, neighborhoods, even internationally famous pubs like Blueberry Hill). By reinforcing the community's self-identity as unique (a long tradition dating back more than five decades, embodied in the 1970s phrase “the neatest people live in U. City”), a culturally oriented program specific to University City can build greater support as individuals make their own decisions along the readiness to change spectrum. The program also builds on existing institutions, such as the decades-old Market in the Loop, which has long supported access to fresh fruits and vegetables in an easy-to-access, publicly supported downtown space.

As part of this program, coalition building will be essential given the diversity in the city, in terms of races and the large numbers of seniors, and the limitations of funds that will restrict opportunities. Coalitions provide a personal link to the community and understand issues that may not be addressed in an obesity program, thus they can help modify a strategic plan as seen in the PRECEDE-PROCEED logic framework model. Churches, synagogues, and other religious institutions will be particularly important, given they can help educate their members about the perceived benefits of regular physical activity and good nutrition and they can help provide cues to act that facilitate a change in behaviors by individuals, according to the health belief model. They also can facilitate community building activities that can contribute to the program objectives, including providing space for community gardens and encouraging public safety activities that can create safer environments where healthier behaviors are more likely.

My community-based program would align with upstream federal and state initiatives that promote better nutrition, more access to healthy foods by lower-income residents, and increased levels of activities by all ages. Given the size of the city, it likely does not have the ability to lobby directly in the state capitol, so it will need to cherry pick any funding source or policy initiative that complements its goals. For instance, the city should seek all available grant opportunities from the State of Missouri to promote chronic disease risk reduction, which could

include funding for community asset mapping, training support for developing nutritional guidelines for schools, and longer-term funding for sustainability and capacity building around obesity and wellness programs at the community level. The city or school district should develop partnerships with the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services to help participate in grant requests for Safe Routes to School Funding from the State and one-time CDC grants such as those through the Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW). Finally, in cooperation with local churches or VISTA volunteers who can be assigned to city, the coalition should work with any cooperative extension service program that can support Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs that seek to connect locally grown produce with University City customers during the growing seasons for fruits and vegetables. Churches and religious institutions are logical partners to support CSA programs because of a strong volunteer base and long tradition of working at the community level.