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'Steps' on the way to boosting health

Program seeks to improve habits

By DAVE NORDSTRAND
The Salinas Californian

Wire baskets piled with grapes, oranges and ripe-red apples beckon customers at checkout counters at La Princesa Market in east Salinas.

The displays - "Choose Healthy" is on each - prompt the sort of impulse buying that a body can appreciate.

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"People ask about them," said Tony Abdulla, an owner of the La Princesa at 614 Williams Road. "We explain the health benefits. I'm sure they encourage people to buy more fruits and vegetables."

The displays are only one symbol of how Steps to a Healthier Salinas, an \$8 million, five-year program, is advancing on many fronts. The goal of Steps is nothing less than cutting the fat and boosting the physical well being of every city resident, with a special focus on Latinos and low-income neighborhoods.

As one of just 40 communities chosen to receive a federal Steps grant, the local effort began in September 2003. After two years of compiling data and hiring staff, the program is showing fruition, say those involved.

"Because of the dramatic increase in obesity and diabetes in recent years, it's important that this succeed," said Susan Stuart, a Monterey County Health Department employee and Steps coordinator.

Statistics driving the effort are indeed startling.

Some examples:

- One of every four adults in Monterey and San Benito counties is obese, the California Health Interview Survey of 2001 found. Being obese increases the risk for chronic diseases, including Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke and breast cancer.

- Thirty-one percent of those ages 12 to 18 in Monterey and San Benito counties are obese or overweight, the survey found.



RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Cecilia Alvarado shops for produce Jan. 20 at La Princesa Market in east Salinas.

TO GET INVOLVED

For more information about the Steps to a Healthier Salinas program in Salinas, visit www.stepstohealthier.salinas.org or call Susan Stuart, Steps coordinator, at 755-4641.

STEPS PARTICIPANTS

Organizations contracted to work with Steps to a Healthier Salinas in fiscal year 2005-06:

• AMERICAN LUNG ASSOCIATION OF THE CENTRAL COAST

- Conducting asthma training for health providers and for teachers in Salinas schools.
- Disseminating current asthma health education information to the community.
- Assisting in the development of school wellness policies.

• BROWN-MILLER COMMUNICATIONS

- Developing social marketing plan.

• HEALTH PROVIDERS: Central Coast Alliance for Health (Medi-Cal managed care agency); Clinica de Salud del Valle de Salinas; Diabetes Care Center; Monterey County Clinical Services Division; Natividad Medical Center.

- Developing and implementing a point-of-care data information system.

- Providing diabetes and asthma self-management and

- Deaths linked to poor diet and physical inactivity rose by 33 percent in the past decade, a 2004 National Institute of Health study shows.

By instilling healthier habits, Steps aims to slow and reverse those ominous trends.

It seeks also to retool the very environments that promote unhealthy lifestyles - the typical employee lunchroom, for example, where sugary, trans-fatty choices stuff vending machines.

"We want to leave a structural change behind," said Karen Smith, a senior health educator for the county. "We want to get an organization to change so they don't just have doughnuts. We want workers to take a fitness break every two hours, too."

Through health educators and brochures, Steps spreads the word on healthy habits.

Strength in numbers

To achieve its goals, the initiative enlisted more than 50 Salinas-area volunteer partners - notably including churches, schools and businesses.

La Princesa is one of those.

Beginning in late February and on every Wednesday, the market will sponsor drawings in which customers can win one of two cloth Steps bags full of fresh produce.

"Wednesday is a slower day at that store, so they'll be promoting healthy foods while increasing their sales," said Peter Miranda, a chronic disease prevention specialist with Steps and the county.

Stuart said she also hopes the market's efforts - there are nine stores in the La Princesa chain - become a model for others.

Cecilia Alvarado, a La Princesa regular, browsed through the bright, clean produce section last week. Alvarado filled a bag with tomatoes. She handpicked avocados. Alvarado said she's long been a believer in eating fresh produce.

"I'm teaching my children the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables," she said.

Steps also relies on 14 contractors and pays them grant money to run programs. The Monterey County Office of Education, for example, is giving teachers and school staffs asthma training.

Asthma is a Steps priority.

"People with asthma sometimes are reluctant to exercise," Stuart said. "They worry it will agitate their asthma."

They reduce activity, the pounds pile on, and they become overweight or maybe obese.

"That introduces a new set of health problems," she said.

The advice for such people is to stay active but first check with their doctors to make sure they can safely exercise, Stuart said.

Health providers such as the Diabetes Care Center and Clinica de Salud del Valle de Salinas also are Steps contractors. Salinas Valley Memorial Healthcare System trains health promoters, who then carry the word into neighborhoods and workplaces.

Reaching out for change

obesity prevention education.

- Reviewing and selecting clinical practice guidelines and protocols for diabetes, obesity and asthma that will include clinical provider and staff trainings.

- Review and selection of a self-management patient education program to include referral to at home case management services by the Monterey County Departments' public health nurses.

• MONTEREY COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

- Increasing healthy food options and physical activity opportunities for youth in the four Salinas school districts.

- Facilitating development of school wellness policies in collaboration with H.E.L.P. in Salinas.

- Facilitating asthma trainings for teachers and school staff.

- Promoting California Smokers' Helpline.

• PREVENTION INSTITUTE

- Assisting in the formation of a Steps Action Council and Steering Committee.

• PUBLIC HEALTH INSTITUTE

- Conducting Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey with random sample of 1,500 women and men, ages 18 and older.

• SALINAS VALLEY MEMORIAL HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

- Training health promoters (promotores de salud) to do health education in neighborhoods and workplaces.

• STANFORD UNIVERSITY

- Directing data analyses and serving as senior evaluation team.

• UNITED WAY OF MONTEREY COUNTY

- Overseeing and coordinating, "Caminemos" mini-grant program, which provides funds to grass-roots groups doing nutrition and physical activity programs

- Overseeing "Choose Your Life," worksite wellness sub-contract with H.E.L.P. Includes nutrition classes and worksite policy promotion.

• YMCA

- Providing after-school program (Alisal Community Friends Program) with physical activity, nutrition education and training for parents and field trip for families.

- Developing workplace wellness policies.



Susan Stuart

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The range of the Steps effort is wide. Among its many other activities:

- Forming walking groups. One is at the Firehouse Recreation Center, 1330 E. Alisal St.
- Urging taquerias to add more healthy choices, such as vegetarian burritos wrapped in whole wheat tortillas.
- Working through agricultural companies to reach field workers with check stuffers, brochures with health information.

More healthy options on catering truck menus also is an aim.

For Steps, the focus is Salinas, but Stuart said she hopes many of the ideas spill over to other towns throughout the county. She said she also hopes the proven successes exhibit staying power far beyond the five-year term of the grant.

"We've created a community council to figure out how to keep them self-sustainable," she said. "We're trying to change things long-term through policy shifts and changes in institutions.

"That's our focus."

Contact Dave Nordstrand at
dnordstrand@thecalifornian.com.

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