

Williams: Take a step toward a healthier lifestyle

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By Penny Williams/Guest columnist

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As a community, how will MetroWest account for healthy eating and active lifestyles among youth and families in the future?

This certainly seems like a difficult thing to forecast. Yet if the combined efforts of the MetroWest YMCA as well as area schools, community service organizations and the MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation serve as future indicators, then achievement of communitywide goals for combating obesity and chronic disease is possible.

For its part, the MetroWest YMCA has adopted Activate America, a national YMCA initiative supported by advisers and researchers such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Stanford University and Harvard's School of Public Health.

With Activate America, the MetroWest YMCA represents one of 370 associations across the country responding to what the YMCA/USA has described as "the nation's ongoing lifestyle health crisis." Particularly in key areas, the MetroWest YMCA has taken steps to serve a substantial and diverse group of people with individualized challenges. These challenges roughly translate into perceived obstacles for managing consistent exercise and healthy eating habits throughout their daily lives.

This burgeoning group is referred to as health seekers. Generally, they want to become healthier, but do not know how to maintain the right combination of habits that work for them; some are not even sure how or where to begin with their nutrition and exercise. Regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity, race or current level of fitness, health seekers want greater control of their lives. They are looking for information and options that are relevant to where they are on their healthy journey.

In a variety of ways, the MetroWest YMCA is aggressively focusing on health seekers and their families. Through staff development, the YMCA will target this population as they work to transcend complex issues inhibiting goal attainment. Program staff will often approach and support health seekers one person or one family at a time.

What is clear from research findings provided by Activate America is that for today's health seekers, one must listen actively to what experiences were attempted in the past and what issues continue to

hinder success. By better understanding a health seeker's lifestyle, the YMCA's ongoing dialog and support will help reduce the frustration if a person falls out of the routine of healthy food and exercise and help set them back on track.

A number of emerging programs at the YMCA will address the needs of health seekers. For youth, the YMCA is building an entire support network. The YMCA seeks to reach children who are inactive with certain family dynamics in which healthy food choices are much less available than their healthier counterparts. Involving parents in the process will help improve the likelihood that a child will achieve greater health.

For health seeking adults, the YMCA will offer more classes for people who want to try something new, like spinning or Pilates, but do not want to join the mainstream class with participants who have been active for some time.

The programs will also offer family group activities. These programs recognize the lifestyles of today's families and help make healthy activities a more central part in their family time together.

In addition to staff and program investments, the MetroWest YMCA and its board are committed to the expansion and renovation of the Framingham branch. The YMCA is adding 10,000 square feet of new program space and bringing the total facility size to 50,250 square feet. The renovations will afford a more inter-generational and welcoming YMCA experience. Children will be able to work out with equipment especially designed for their sizes and personal interests and exercise near or alongside their parents. The project is expected to be completed in late spring 2008.

As people take that important step and first walk through the door, so begins the process of understanding the complex challenges our community is facing. Yet by repositioning the YMCA at the forefront of wellness and anti-obesity movements, Activate America will help recall the heart of the YMCA's original mission dating back to 1844.

As we move forward into the future, the YMCA is committed to learning from health seekers and becoming more responsive to the health needs of our MetroWest community.

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