

# YMCA Tackles America's Health Crisis

By DAVID CRARY  
The Associated Press  
Friday, January 11, 2008; 6:38 PM

NEW YORK -- Founded in the mid-19th century, the Young Men's Christian Association has expanded far beyond its name in the United States. It welcomes all faiths, half the 20.2 million people it serves are female, and more than half are adults.

With that diverse clientele in mind, the Y is again redefining itself. A new strategic plan envisions the organization as America's paramount fitness and anti-obesity crusader, combating what it calls "the nation's ongoing lifestyle health crisis."

While maintaining its varied youth programs and vast child-care network, the Y is aggressively expanding health-related initiatives, notably through a program called Activate America.

At hundreds of local Ys nationwide, officials are retraining staff, redesigning facilities and revising activities to better serve the millions of Americans who find it hard to stick with weight-loss and fitness regimens.

"Our history has been one of taking a lead on key issues facing our society," said Neil Nicoll, who since May 2006 has been president of the YMCA of the USA - the parent group that coordinates activities of the 967 independently run YMCA associations across the country.

Founded in Britain in 1844 by Christian evangelicals, the YMCA opened its first U.S. branch in Boston in 1851 and soon adopted as a goal "the improvement of the spiritual, mental, social and physical condition of young men."

It established hotel-like residence halls, organized summer camps, and oversaw the invention of volleyball and basketball. During both world wars, it deployed thousands of volunteers to provide services for U.S. troops and war prisoners.

One by one, barriers to participation fell -- women and non-Christians were welcomed, and in the 1960s the Y greatly expanded inner-city operations. By the 1980s, it was embracing the fitness boom, and building many new facilities.

Now, more than 370 of its associations already have joined Activate America, which Nicoll said is targeted at the 40 percent of Americans who crave a healthier lifestyle but waver in their pursuit of it.

"A lot of our population doesn't respond to what your gym teacher told you," he said.

"They're looking for personal support, done in a more holistic way. We want programs geared to group activity so people can develop connections instead of just running in and out."

One example: the YMCA of Greater New York in September began offering a 12-week, personalized exercise program - free to members - that includes four individual sessions with a fitness coach.

In Anderson, S.C., the Y is holding monthly weigh-ins as part of a communal weight-loss drive. Other Ys are reassessing the nutritional value of food offered in their vending machines and at their child-care centers.

Karen Leslie, CEO of YMCA of Greater Providence in Rhode Island, said the initiative means her nine-branch association will focus less on gung-ho fitness buffs and more on those who struggle to achieve good health.

"We have to retrain our staff so they will actively listen to what the needs are," Leslie said. "We want to move away from prescribing what we believe individuals need."

In a related effort, Pioneering Healthier Communities, the Y is working with other civic groups in more than 110 cities and towns to combat obesity, poor nutrition and physical inactivity community-wide.

"When the YMCA looked at a changing America, what they saw was a lifestyle that was getting out of control," said Wes Alles, a Stanford University School of Medicine researcher who has helped design the Y's initiatives.

David MacLeod, a Central Michigan University historian who has studied American nonprofits and youth groups, said the new health initiative might baffle some of the Y's 19th century founders but suggested it fit with a long tradition of change.

"The YMCA is an excellent case study of adaptation and survival," he said. "They have a history of openness to new ideas."

That may help explain its steady growth. Its revenue of \$5.7 billion in 2006 - from donations, government support and user fees - was topped only by the American Red Cross among U.S. nonprofits.

Many Y participants benefit from financial assistance, and even full membership fees usually are less than commercial health clubs. Yet a survey of 10,000 gym users, just released by the independent watchdog group Consumer Reports, found that health facilities at Y's and other nonprofit centers were generally better rated than big health-club chains.

Overall, the Y hopes to expand its clientele by 25 percent, to 25 million, within four years. Yet though its full, formal name no longer describes the YMCA's mission or participants, there's no serious thought of changing it.

"The name 'YMCA' is so widely recognized across the country - it's up there with Coca-Cola and IBM as a symbol and a name," Nicoll said. "But we continually need to work to help people understand how much broader we are than that name."

---

On the Net:

<http://www.ymca.net/>