

Eleanor Littman and Megan Joseph: Partnership tackling childhood obesity

Santa Cruz County's children are growing -- not just up, but out. In a 2009 Community Assessment Project CAP report, our county ranked as one of the worst in California -- 40th out of 66 -- in terms of how many children under the age of 5 are overweight. This has serious implications for the children themselves, who will be more likely to suffer from health problems like diabetes, and for our community. In 2006, the obesity epidemic cost Santa Cruz County over \$317 million in health care costs and lost productivity. The figure for California is about \$41 billion annually.

In response, a local community collaborative of dozens of local agencies called Go for Health! has joined forces to turn this trend around. Go for Health! works closely with the Health Improvement Partnership HIP of Santa Cruz County, which is a county-wide collaborative of health, foundation and government leaders dedicated to increasing access to care and building a stronger health care delivery system in Santa Cruz County.

Eleanor Littman, HIP's Executive Director, recently had a conversation with Megan Joseph, United Way's Director of Community Organizing and an active Go for Health! member, about the group and its activities.

EL: How did obesity become such a problem in our county?

MJ: It's not just our county -- this is a national issue. Childhood obesity has tripled over the past 30 years. No single factor is responsible, which is part of why it's so hard to change. A combination of cheap fast food, sugary drinks, junk food ads and kids spending more time in front of TV or computer screens instead of running around outside in a safe park or neighborhood all play a role.

EL: How does Go for Health! tackle those?

MJ: We try to be active on many fronts at once. Through the 5210 campaign, we help doctors and teachers educate families about obesity and make it easy to remember that kids should have five servings of fruits and vegetables every day, no more than two hours of screen time, at least one hour of physical activity, and zero sugary drinks. We work to make fresh produce more convenient by making it available in corner markets, offer healthier choices in schools and restaurants, promote options for physical activity in neighborhoods and schools, and build capacity to do even more.

EL: Are young people themselves involved?

MJ: Absolutely! A group of high school students in Watsonville, Jovenes SANOS, has been doing incredible policy work and getting national recognition. There's even a YouTube video about their policy successes and strategies: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGU1z1RvQ9M>. Their involvement is critical because the Latino community is hit even harder than the county population overall by obesity and diabetes. Among children and adults, Latinos were 20 percent more likely to be obese and 9.1 percent less likely to eat fruits and vegetables than the general population.

EL: Where can people go to learn more or get involved in Go for Health! activities?

MJ: The easiest way is to visit the United Way of Santa Cruz County's website, [http://www.unitedwaysc.org/Go for Health.php](http://www.unitedwaysc.org/Go_for_Health.php). We welcome new members; we meet quarterly as a collaborative and monthly for subcommittees. Anyone who'd like some colorful 5210 materials as reminders to eat healthier and be more active -- such as posters, bookmarks, or refrigerator magnets -- should contact me at mjoseph@unitedwaysc.org.

Eleanor Littman is the executive director of the Health Improvement Project. Megan Joseph is the United Way's Director of Community Organizing and an active Go for Health! member.