



The Times

Wake-up call

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STAFF WRITER

Trenton received a jolting wake-up call recently with the news that almost half the city's children are overweight. Many of those kids are not only overweight but obese, which means their young lives have been compromised before they have really gotten a chance to live them.

The dire snapshot of an accelerating problem was compiled by the Center for State Health Policy at Rutgers University, which focused on urban areas throughout the state. Trenton, with the highest rate of childhood obesity among the five cities, had an obesity rate of 28 percent in 2008-2009 among children ages 3 to 19 years old.

The causes of what has become an epidemic of childhood obesity are well known: poor diet and lack of exercise. Children in cities such as Trenton are less likely to have access to recreational facilities and more likely to grow up in single-parent households, two more contributing factors.

Childhood obesity can lead to more serious health consequences, from diabetes to heart disease to shortened lifespan, experts warn. And, because obese children and adolescents are targets of early and systematic social discrimination, the psychological stress can cause low self-esteem, which, in turn, can hinder academic and social functioning and persist into adulthood.

Trenton's community, health and spiritual leaders took the first step toward a solution recently by gathering to discuss childhood obesity at the invitation of Isles Inc. The group's makeup conveyed exactly the kind of integrated involvement necessitated by such a pervasive problem.

One part of the prescription that is already in place is an Isles program, created in conjunction with the city's faith-based organizations, combining spiritual exercise with the physical variety. The "spirit walks" are aimed at improving health and wellness by establishing walking groups based around houses of worship.

We suggest the city establish a task force to come up with a comprehensive approach to this pressing problem by identifying and incorporating the best objectives in a citywide push for better health. It could be similar to the initiatives in which all residents are urged to read the same book. Or it could take the form of a challenge to one of the other cities identified by the Rutgers study to see which city can make the most progress in a year's time.

There is a wealth of resources and guidelines available to help streamline Trenton's goals. A wonderful starting point would be the list of objectives set out by Exercise, Eat Always Together Inc., a volunteer group that maintains that family involvement is the route to healthier lifestyles.

Here's what they suggested:

Make community facilities available and safe for physical activity for all people on a regular basis, including weekends.

Change the perception of obesity so that improved health, not personal appearance, becomes the chief concern.

Ensure that more food options low in fat and calories, as well as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat or nonfat dairy products, are available on school campuses and during school events.

Work with the schools to ensure daily, quality physical education for all grades.

Facilitate a six-week program that incorporates various forms of exercise, nutrition and medically supervised weight loss for children and their families.

Educate parents and children on how to prepare and shop for healthy, inexpensive meals, including healthy fast food for families on the go.

With the city's concerted backing and the cooperation of its residents, these objectives are entirely attainable.

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