

Community Seeks Emotional and Physical Wellness

Staying healthy in the face of chronic disease is about balancing exercise, stress, and diet

By Sandra Jordan
Special to the NNPA
from the St. Louis
American

“It’s the stress of what we are going through as a community that is making us unhealthy,” said St. Louis Regional Health Commission CEO Robert Freund.

Through the Gateway to Better Health Program, RHC has connected about half of the St. Louis area’s uninsured population to primary care doctors at Federally Qualified Health Centers.

RHC data indicates about 60 percent of those persons have chronic illnesses. They have diabetes, they have hypertension or both.

“We’re doing a great job of trying to get them into medical care and managing those diseases so they don’t spin out of control and turn into strokes, turn into amputations – diabetes turn into blindness,” Freund said. “The question we started asking was: is there a way we can get the numbers down from 60 percent of those folks having a chronic disease before we get to them – before they hit our health centers?”

And they started thinking about what was really driving the development of those chronic conditions, as

well as ways to strengthen community engagement.

Freund said community was telling the RHC that it needed to get back to stressing the importance of mental health. People are stressed-out. And resources to help are scarce.

“A lot of what is driving the poor health ..., it’s not necessarily lack of access or not necessarily lack of medicine, it’s stuff that’s going on in our everyday lives,” he said.

And there is scientific data to support it. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, conducted by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta

flight response,’ which releases chemicals in your body. And if it’s always in a fight or flight response, it’s going to jack up your blood pressure; it’s going to jack up your blood sugar levels,” Freund said. “And you know what that gives you? Diabetes and hypertension.”

The RHC started a collective conversation about what it takes to become a healthier community through its effort, Alive and Well St. Louis. The first conversations were heard on local radio through a series of health messages based on the commission’s 10-year review health status report and hosted by Inte-

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and Kaiser Permanente in San Diego, found a direct link between childhood trauma and adult onset of chronic diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease and some types of cancer.

“Your body just gets so worked up until ‘fight or

grated Health Network CEO Bethany Johnson Javois (who is currently on hiatus from IHN while she serves as the managing director of the Ferguson Commission).

Conversations expanded from the airwaves to back to



SLEDDING (WILEY PRICE/ST. LOUIS AMERICAN)

grassroots level, where behavioral health professionals are training community members to become ambassadors – who will help others learn how to fight toxic stress in their lives to create a community that is not merely existing – it’s Alive and Well.

There are tools and techniques that individuals can use for personal stress reduction, including talking about it.

“People who are in community with each other and are connected with one another are much more likely to deal with stress better,” Freund said. “If you are isolated or are alone, if you don’t have a natural support group ... you won’t get through the stresses as well as others.”

Something as simple as exercising or taking walks help deal with stress levels;

making a decision to have a positive attitude; taking a few minutes to reflect; taking a deep breath and meditating are useful tools, Freund said.

“When you really find yourself being anxious and worked up, step back, take deep breaths,” he said. “Sounds easy, but people don’t do it.”

Persons who are profoundly depressed or anxious should seek professional help.

“What we are finding is, it doesn’t take an acute crisis for people to make themselves sick over stress, and that’s where counseling agencies come in handy,” Freund reminded.

Provident Counseling, Hopewell Center and Lutheran Family Services are some of the agencies in the St. Louis area, as well as community health centers.

“Talk to your doctor and say, ‘I need some help.’”

Freund admits there are not enough mental health professionals for the amount of people who are stressed.

“If it reaches a tipping point, we need to get people help,” he said. “Before that, work with each other. Just talking about it with a friend can a lot of times be the thing that is the difference between getting people through it or not.”

The next Alive and Well training is scheduled for March 24. RHC said it will be conducted by the Department of Mental Health.

If you are interested in joining the conversation, download the Bonfyre app and search for Alive and Well, or find out more at www.aliveandwellstl.com.

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