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# Wellness Initiatives and Public Housing



BY JOSH CRITES AND ELIZABETH KOVAR

As the affordable housing industry strives to meet the needs of families in its programs, attention must be given not just to housing, but other factors such as general wellness, fitness and nutrition. Populations served by public housing authority include low income, minorities and senior/disabled persons. A 2006 study from the Center for Disease Control indicated that obesity is higher among lower income individuals, minorities,

women and persons with disabilities than among the general population.<sup>1</sup> One contributing factor could be the lack of access to resources and information. This article discusses some ways in which agencies can be proactive in providing health and wellness programs for the families they serve.

<sup>1</sup> Garcia, J. Healthy People 2010: Nutrition and Overweight April 3, 2008. [www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/otheract/hpdata2010/focusareas/fa19-nutrition2.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/otheract/hpdata2010/focusareas/fa19-nutrition2.htm)



## Starting Your Own Home-Grown Initiative

Does your agency have a community development program? How about a staff member that lives and breathes exercise? These are just two of the many ways to get a fitness program started. If so, be creative in your approach to implementing a wellness program. What resources does your community have? Open spaces, sidewalks, playground equipment, kitchen or community rooms may enhance your programming options. As a fitness professional, I recommend starting with a walking program to get your residents moving. Cardiovascular exercise is known to decrease stress and enhance mood—plus, walking is free! In 2011, the Irvington (N.J.) Housing Authority launched just such an initiative: the Team Walk for a Healthy Workforce—Walk-a-Thon.

NAHRO member agencies can also peruse the NAHRO Solutions Database for past award-winning health and fitness initiatives, including

the Housing Authority of the City of Austin's "Get Fit America" and Norfolk Housing and Redevelopment Authority's "Getting Fit Together is a Rewarding Experience," among many others.

## Partnerships

Once again, what does your community provide in the means of healthy living? Many community-based health organizations are looking to outside their facility doors to enhance relationships and to reinforce their mission statement. The YMCA, Parks and Recreation Community Centers, Metroparks and other local non-profits are well known for not only helping their community, but also for helping those most in need.

In order to establish a relationship, write your program plan that also identifies your demographics. Include all pertinent information such as age, race, income and education level, transportation and language barriers, diseases and health vitals. Also, include the goals, program length and what measurable results the organization wants to achieve. If your community has a lack of fitness resources, start thinking outside the box. Does

your executive director or board chairperson have a good relationship with a family doctor



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that might be expanded into volunteer work? On a larger scale, is there a nearby hospital or clinic that is willing to partner with your agency?

In 2010, the Providence (R.I.) Housing Authority was able to partner with the Chad Brown Health Center, a local health care provider, to create a new health and wellness center on site at one of its elderly/disabled high-rise buildings. That same year, the Lincoln (R.I.) Housing Authority partnered with culinary students from nearby Johnson & Wales University to conduct healthy cooking demonstrations for the agency's senior residents. There are many other examples of such cooperative ventures nationwide. Overall, partnerships are a win-win situation that may lead to further program development.

Whether you have a partnership established or not, many national organizations provide grant based funding. Grants will also require program information as mentioned above. Many community-based organizations have the experience with grant writing and may have grants that renew annually. Either way, your governmental agency or the non-profit is highly eligible for grants. Many national and governmental organizations in the fitness industry provide grant money for movement programs. Some examples include, but are not limited to: GoGirlGo!, Foot Locker, Precor Cares and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Plenty of housing authorities across the country have partnered with organizations and received grants to provide fitness and healthy living education to residents. The West Palm Beach (Fla.) Housing Authority partnered with



The Quantum Foundation, a local organization dedicated to healthier communities, to build a fitness center at their Dunbar public housing site. The center is open six days a week and offers cardio machines, free weights, machine weights and exercise classes. The residents pay a one-time \$10 fee to join, and have access within walking distance to multiple exercise opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

The Irvington (N.J.) Housing Authority has implemented the same concept, but with a twist. While their on-site facility is open five days per week, in order to obtain gym access, adults are required to have a physical conducted from their family doctor. This policy not only opens the door for residents to have a safe place to exercise, but connects them with the doctor for a routine physical.<sup>3</sup>

Giving residents access to on-site fitness opportunities is only

one of many ways to provide fitness and wellness opportunities. The King County Housing Authority (KCHA) collaborated with the King County and Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) to work on curbing childhood obesity. This partnership, along with a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, allowed KCHA to begin a program called "Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities." The main goal of the project "is to improve the policies and systems that support healthy eating and active living for children living in four public housing sites within King County and Seattle.

Deliverables include increasing physical activity access, opportunities and levels; improving consumption of healthy foods; creating a strong local and sustainable food system; enhancing public housing social and built environments to support healthy living; and creating systems change at the community, organizational and policy levels."<sup>4</sup>

One way the Milwaukee Housing Authority is trying to increase the well being of its residents is by way of an initiative called "With Every Heartbeat is Life". "The project is part of an effort by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute of the National Institutes of Health to reduce preventable diseases in low-income communities of color."<sup>5</sup> It includes a "Train the Trainer" initiative that targets African Americans in low income neighborhoods and trains them to become knowledgeable in healthy living, and in turn to help others in their community learn

<sup>2</sup> [www.wpbha.org/residentprograms/index.htm](http://www.wpbha.org/residentprograms/index.htm)

<sup>3</sup> [www.ihanj.org/fitness\\_form.html](http://www.ihanj.org/fitness_form.html)

<sup>4</sup> [www.healthykidshealthycommunities.org/communities/king-county-seattle-wa](http://www.healthykidshealthycommunities.org/communities/king-county-seattle-wa)

<sup>5</sup> [www.jsonline.com/features/health/51148527.html](http://www.jsonline.com/features/health/51148527.html)

about creating and sustaining a healthy lifestyle. The program coordinator said that the program was targeted towards African Americans because that was the majority in Milwaukee's public housing. The curriculum focused on issues that face African-American; heart disease, obesity and diabetes.

Whether or not your housing authority can find a partner organization, organizing on-site fitness initiatives can be cost-effectively done. While many agencies may not have the budget to contract a personal trainer, a model similar to what Milwaukee used could help. Milwaukee was able to have a trainer show residents tips on healthy living. The residents in turn could go out and train fellow residents. Can your Housing Authority contract several hours of training from the trainer? The personal trainer can educate and train residents on how to implement fitness programs, resources for nutritional guidance or program progressions or regressions. This might also lead to a train-the-trainer wellness sustainability program, like the one mentioned above.

## National Programs

As Housing Authorities are governmental agency, it may serve your population best to get involved with a national fitness initiative. The Let's Move Initiative, launched by Michelle Obama, aims to fight obesity and raise a healthy generation of children. The website provides the local partnership opportunities and resources to assist with your programming. These programs are organized, well researched and allow residents to be a part of something "big."

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## Creating Healthier Spaces

John Kain coined the term 'Spatial Mismatch' in his 1968 research, which postulated that low-income minorities were spatially separated from jobs and other opportuni-

ties that were emerging in suburbs and other locations that were hard to access for these populations.<sup>6</sup> While this idea is still in debate, the built environment has a last-

<sup>6</sup> John F. Kain, "Housing Segregation, Negro Employment, and Metropolitan Decentralization", Quarterly Journal of Economics, May 1968. Vol 82 No 2. pp. 175-197



ing affect on the health and well-being of not only housing authority residents but everyone in our communities. A study in the *Journal of Health Promotion* stated that “although strides have been made to increase safety and comfort in public housing, there remains poor access to physical resources and healthful food sources.”<sup>7</sup>

There is a growing amount of research and writing on connectivity of neighborhoods and housing to grocery stores and healthy eating options. The CDC defines food deserts as “areas that lack access to affordable fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk, and other foods that make up the full range of a healthy diet.”<sup>8</sup> Because of financial restraints and other considerations, many affordable housing and public housing units are in areas spatially separated from convenient grocery shopping areas. As future affordable housing stock is built, consideration must be given to the opportunities residents will have based on the location of the housing.

The design of a development may also impact the health of

affordable housing residents. Developments that are walkable and that encourage residents to enjoy their neighborhood have multiple benefits. The principle of Active Design attempts to use development as a means to combat obesity through everyday interaction with the built environment. “Active Design is the idea

**During a budget tough era, healthy living may seem like PHA’s last concern. However, physical well-being is of the upmost importance to everyone and residents of our housing programs should not be excluded.**

that we design cities and buildings to encourage people to get more exercise. This is not about encouraging us to go to the gym and working out more, but instead, it’s about giving citizens more of a workout through how we interact with our environment on a daily basis. This could include walking instead of driving, taking stairs instead of elevators, and creating parks and other interesting engaging environments to walk through. By attacking obesity through urban design and architecture, governments are beginning to

realize that designers might be their best warriors in the battle against obesity and its costs.”<sup>9</sup>

Many of the new HOPE VI developments across the country have embraced these principles and have thus improved the look and design of affordable housing.

There are still opportunities to improve already-built units. In Cleveland, the city and county have brought farmers’ markets to low-income neighborhoods. The Cuyahoga (Ohio) County Housing Authority allowed 6 vacant acres

near a public housing project to be turned into an urban garden. The idea would be for “produce raised there could create income for recent immigrants and other farmers, variety for customers seeking local food at the West Side Market, and greater access to fresh food for public-housing residents, who would be sold food at a significant discount.”<sup>10</sup> The Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) also offers a similar program. HACLA partnered with Triscuit and Urban Farming to plant a community garden at the Ranch San Pedro public housing community. The garden was built to help the residents have improved access to fresh vegeta-

<sup>9</sup> Robbins, L. Jack A New Design Movement That Can Help Us Beat Obesity, [www.fastcodesign.com/1663272/a-new-design-movement-that-can-help-us-beat-obesity](http://www.fastcodesign.com/1663272/a-new-design-movement-that-can-help-us-beat-obesity)

<sup>10</sup> [http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2010/07/farm\\_to\\_grow\\_crops\\_economic\\_de.html](http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2010/07/farm_to_grow_crops_economic_de.html)

<sup>7</sup> Regan, G. et al. Obesogenic influences in public housing: a mixed-method analysis. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, Mar-April, 282-290, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> [www.cdc.gov/Features/FoodDeserts/](http://www.cdc.gov/Features/FoodDeserts/)

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bles. The Rancho San Pedro garden is one of two community gardens at low income housing facilities in Los Angeles, with the

second one being implemented in late 2011.

It is hard to ignore the austerity measures that are affecting housing authorities across the country right now. During a budget tough era, healthy living may seem like PHA's last concern. However, physical well-being is of the utmost importance to everyone and residents of our housing programs should not be excluded. To expect residents to move toward self-sufficiency while being physically unwell is unrealistic. Basic health is the impetus for having a happy and productive life. Creative thinking, partnering

and a willingness to explore opportunities will give affordable housing providers more ways to empower their residents to have healthy happy lives.

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