



PLAY
Policy Leadership
for Active Youth

Addressing Overweight

Interventions Tailored to the Rural South

Summer 2005

The obesity epidemic, especially in the rural South, has created an urgent need for effective intervention programs that can be replicated across communities. Successful programs help communities to assess risks, increase public knowledge, and create environmental supports to foster healthy eating and physical activity habits among children and adults.

Wilkes Wild About Wellness

A comprehensive, community-based program in Washington, Georgia focused on combating obesity and related chronic diseases, Wilkes Wild About Wellness (WWW) began in 2002 when the mayor of Washington, a town in Wilkes County, sought assistance from researchers at the University of Georgia (UGA) and the Medical College of Georgia (MCG) in improving the health of the community. According to the Georgia County Guide, Wilkes is classified as a rural county with long-term population loss, economic challenges, and a less healthy population. Washington, a small Southern town with historic homes and peaceful farms, is also marked by conditions representative of Wilkes County in general. The welcoming spirit of the citizens, coupled with the desire to improve the community's health, made Wilkes an optimal setting for a multi-dimensional nutrition and

physical activity intervention. In a collaborative partnership, the residents of Washington-Wilkes, UGA, and MCG started the program, which now serves over 10,000 individuals in Washington and surrounding Wilkes County.

Taking the Community's Pulse

During the first phase of the WWW program, the community's health needs were assessed at various levels: individual, family, school, church, and community. By conducting interviews with community leaders, focus groups with community members, and comprehensive health assessments of youth and adults at local schools and churches, the program team, consisting of community leaders and university researchers, identified issues which were of concern to community members as well as potential ways to develop programs to address community needs. In addition, a

number of variables to be tracked during the program were identified.

Tracking Our Progress Individual Variables

- Height and weight measurements
- Eating and physical activity behaviors
- Knowledge and skills with regard to nutrition and physical activity

Community-Based Variables

- Amount of newspaper coverage on health issues
- Shelf space in grocery stores devoted to healthy items, specials and advertising
- Menu choices and nutrition labeling in restaurants
- Number of participants attending each program
- Number of programs attended by each participant
- Task force participation
- Walking paths, exercise facilities, and other environmental changes



The results of the assessments also revealed concerns among residents regarding the perceived incidence of cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes, as well as the lack of physical activity and nutrition education resources. In addition, a number of barriers to healthy eating were identified by the community. Findings from the school and community assessments allowed program planners to design an intervention tailored to the specific needs, concerns, and strengths of the Washington-Wilkes community.

Three overarching recommendations emerged:

- Develop a multi-media campaign for information dissemination,
- Promote and increase physical activity participation, and
- Improve the citizens' nutrition status.

These recommendations were presented to the Wilkes Community Leader Task Force (CLTF), a local group charged with identifying the health needs and engaging the community. The CLTF selected the community intervention activities for implementation. The acceptability of these recommendations and their various components was high, due to the direct involvement

of community members in the needs assessment and design of the program.

Making It Work

Identifying and utilizing influential people within the community is a crucial step in developing a successful intervention. From the outset of the WWW program, suggested policy and environmental changes for Washington-Wilkes were championed by a prominent community member, which enhanced the extent of implementation at both the individual and community levels. Not merely a figurehead, a community champion can continually accomplish goals through access to and influence on a variety of community groups. In WWW, the education and expertise that UGA

and MCG provided was at the core of the intervention, but it also required the assistance and influence of a respected, recognized, and accessible community leader to generate involvement among community residents. The “champion” and one other local resident were hired to serve as community outreach specialists responsible for carrying out WWW programs in the area. Important messages are often more readily accepted by a group when the information is disseminated by a trusted member of that group.

WWW entered the implementation phase in 2003. Eleven community churches, worksites, and other venues served as sites for a series of six-week nutrition classes, and walking clubs were established for both children and adults. Additionally, health fairs at schools and worksites helped educate the community while the local hospital, Wills Memorial, played a key role in promoting nutrition and physical activity. For children, a summer day camp was started with a focus on nutrition and physical activity. With each of these components in place, the program began to expand, and by 2004, there were a number of other related activities underway.

Schools in the Wilkes community embraced walking and physical



activity programs as well as nutrition classes and health fairs. After-school programs also became a popular setting for interactive nutrition education sessions. Twelve-week church-based wellness classes, as well as worksite wellness programs, served to educate the adult population. A hospital-sponsored weight loss challenge became a fun and enjoyable way for citizens to increase their physical activity.

Maintaining the Momentum

The success of the WWW program, and interventions of its kind, hinges not only on the immediate results but also on the sustainability of the program as a whole. While this program continues to receive support from its UGA and MCG partners, methods for sustaining the program independently have been identified. On all levels, it is important to continue building and promoting sustainability in the following manner:

• Provide training opportunities for school staff to increase community capacity

• Develop worksite wellness teams that adopt policy and environmental supports for healthy lifestyles

• Facilitate the development of a community health coalition

• Identify community-initiated grant projects and resources to fund new opportunities

Early Progress and Future Goals

Evaluation of the success of WWW and other community nutrition interventions is vital to continued refinement of such efforts. In an ideal situation, program and community components lead to individual changes which then lead to behavior changes and, eventually, a measurable change in weight status and other health indicators across the community. Re-examining

the variables identified during the assessment phase of the intervention will allow investigators to determine if positive change has resulted for individuals and the community as a whole.

Some initiatives that have shown a positive effect in Washington-Wilkes thus far include:

- Nutrition/health lifestyle classes at a variety of locations in the community
- Working with local grocery stores to offer health promotion activities such as healthy cooking demonstrations
- Encouraging local restaurants to offer healthier options
- Community and self-directed walking clubs
- Promotion of physical activity in local schools
- Distribution of quarterly newsletters to interested community members
- Writing a health section for the local newspaper that includes healthy recipes, articles on nutrition and physical activity, and current community activities

- Framing health messages for church ministers
- Word-of-mouth health messages
- Establishing safe, lighted walking areas and biking trails

The initial efforts to target obesity and related chronic diseases in Washington-Wilkes have been a great success. Based on preliminary results, it appears that improved knowledge about nutrition and physical activity as well as increased community involvement have been just a few of the important changes to occur. While more time and information about sustainability is needed to confirm the success of the project, early indications are very promising. One of the most important aspects of the WWW project has become its transferability. WWW may serve as a model intervention for other communities in their effort to combat the epidemic of obesity. The strategies employed here can be modified and applied to other rural communities in order to educate and improve the health of residents.





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Additional information regarding Wilkes Wild about Wellness may be obtained from the program web-site at <http://www.fcs.uga.edu/washingtonwilkes/> or by contacting Donna Hardy, program liaison, at donnahardy@washintonwilkes.org or (706) 678-4702

References

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