

COACH Combats Obesity, Promotes Wellness in Children



by Nick DeRatto
Staff Writer

Over the years, the Chesterfield County Health Department has conducted studies to determine the percentage of overweight children in the county. Through health screenings at public schools, they have found that nearly 30 percent of children are overweight or at the risk of becoming overweight.

Faced with these statistics, the Chester Kiwanis Club has decided to promote wellness and healthy living for children.

"Since we just started this initiative four months ago, we are still in the early stages," said Holly Flores, member of the Chester Kiwanis Club said. "Right now, we just want to make the community aware of this issue."

In helping to build up awareness, the Kiwanis Club has teamed up with COACH, the Coalition

for Active Children. Formed in 2002 by parents and members of organizations concerned about the wellness of children, COACH has made it their mission to promote more exercise and better nutrition throughout the community.

"With COACH, we are trying to engage the community. We want the community to realize that this is not a problem for the health department, but rather a problem for the entire community to face," said Gail Sutler, Director of Nursing for the Chesterfield Health District and a member of COACH and the COACH Board.

To engage the community, COACH is in the process of planning their third annual COACH Family Festival. Held on June 4, the Festival will highlight the groundbreaking of the new Government Center Trail, as well as feature games, activities and prizes. It will also include plenty of ways for

them to get their message heard.

"We will have information for parents and different vendors set up at the festival. We will have displays set up showcasing healthy food alternatives and showing parents how they can prepare healthier meals," said Flores.

Not only does the Kiwanis Club want to partner with COACH to help put on the festival, they would also like to start up a one week camp during the summer for kids that are at risk of becoming overweight or obese.

Along with planning fun events for the community, COACH and the Kiwanis Club have focused their attention on the school system.

"We are trying to expand on walking and biking programs that they have in some schools," said Sutler. "Ideally, we would like to introduce a biking program to all middle schools, which is our most at-risk group, with a professional instructor that can teach them bike safety."

More exercise is not the only goal that Kiwanis and COACH would like to tackle in the schools. They also have been looking for ways to get children to eat healthier at school. One way, they say, to do this is to move the vending machines away from high-traffic areas, making them less accessible.

COACH and Kiwanis would also like to eventually make school lunches healthier, although they have not been able to proceed with any plans for that yet. However, the

school system may already be half-way there.

According to Tim Bullis, Assistant Director of Community Relations for Chesterfield County Schools, the schools have already taken some steps over the past few years to make their lunches healthier.

"We have moved to serve fries, chicken sandwiches and chips that are free of trans fat. We have also introduced low-fat dressing and milk and vegetarian alternatives. Students can now choose to have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and two vegetable side dishes," said Bullis.

Although COACH and Kiwanis both have plans for a variety of activities and programs in the county, Flores stresses that support from the community is needed for any changes to take place.

"In order for there to be change, this must be a grassroots effort," said Flores. "We need involvement from the community to push these initiatives to the next level."

For more information on the COACH program or to get involved, visit their Web site at <http://www.chesterfield.gov/COACH/default.asp> or contact Holly Flores at floreslink@comcast.net.

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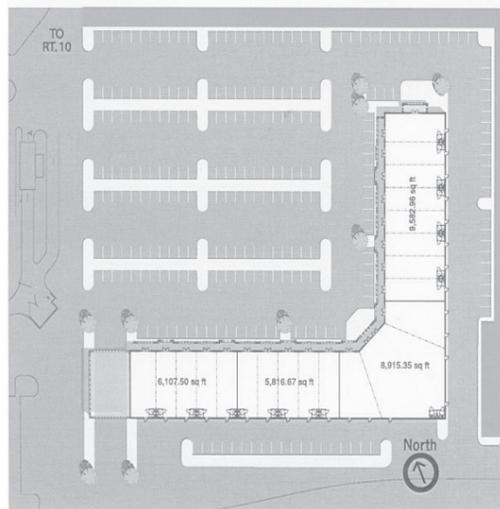
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