



The Times

Obesity rampant in Trenton children

Friday, March 12, 2010

robert stern

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

TRENTON -- Almost half of Trenton's children are overweight or obese, according to alarming statistics in a recent Rutgers University study.

Childhood obesity is an epidemic that afflicts children in Trenton and other New Jersey urban communities at a notably higher rate than the national average, according to the study by the Center for State Health Policy at Rutgers University.

Poor diet and lack of exercise, the prevalence of single-parent households, as well as the perception of inadequate or unsafe access to recreational facilities in Trenton and other urban settings are likely contributing factors to the higher rates of children being obese and overweight here compared with national figures, city leaders and child welfare advocates said.

Childhood obesity is a societal problem that can lead to more serious health consequences, from diabetes to heart disease to shortened lifespan, experts warn.

"Our numbers are catastrophic here in the city when it comes to childhood obesity," said Samuel Frisby, Trenton's recreation director.

"If you want a healthy community, people have to look healthy, feel healthy," he said.

Frisby was among almost 50 civic, public health and faith leaders who gathered at the Trenton Marriott yesterday for a discussion on childhood obesity hosted by the nonprofit community organization Isles Inc.

Trenton, which had the highest rate of childhood obesity among five New Jersey cities surveyed in the Rutgers study, had an obesity rate of 28 percent in 2008-2009 among children ages 3 to 19 years old.

The rate for children being overweight and obese in Trenton was 47.3 percent, slightly higher than in New Brunswick, Newark, Vineland and Camden.

Nationally, an estimated 16.9 percent of children ages 2 to 19 years old are considered obese, according to the most recent data, from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey in 2007-2008, while 31.7 percent of children are considered overweight and obese.

Reining in childhood obesity is important because its impact is pervasive throughout society, said Marty Johnson, president and CEO of Isles.

Focusing on preventing obesity in children is more cost-effective than dealing with the consequences of obesity later in life, he suggested.

Isles has been working with the Trenton region's faith-based organizations to coordinate "spirit walks" throughout the year aimed at improving health and wellness by establishing walking groups based around houses of worship.

It takes 30 steps to burn one calorie and 3,500 calories to burn off a pound of weight, according to Isles.

"This is the prevention side of health care and investing up front is going to save us a whole bunch of money on the back end," Johnson said.

Prevention could mean getting involved in fun and inexpensive activities like dancing too, said Laticia Bailey, community events coordinator for Horizon NJ Health.

Communities and organizations also have to do a better job of getting through to parents about the importance of healthy diets, which include limiting soda intake, for example, and an exercise regimen for their children, participants in yesterday's discussion said.

"Part of the problem with childhood obesity is that parents and caregivers are out of the picture," said Vicky Coll, a representative of the American Heart Association.

©2010 Times of Trenton

© 2010 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.