



Walking is Easy, Healthy, and Good Medicine

Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium Health Promotion



With the alarmingly high rate of 7 out of 101 Alaska Native people in Southeast Alaska overweight or obese, and with 4 out of 101 Alaska Native people not meeting national recommendations for physical activity, a major goal of the SEARHC Health Promotion team was to increase physical activity and reverse the Obesity trend. Insufficient physical activity can be a risk factor for obesity, diabetes, cancers, and heart disease. Walking can lead to improved physical and mental health. In collaboration with the Juneau Dimond Field House indoor walking track, SEARHC piloted the first

“Walk for the Health of It” January walking event. SEARHC had already been looking for ways to increase track usage since they pay an annual fee to give Alaska Native people free use of the track. Results showed a significant increase in walking as a result of the event.

Challenge

The SEARHC mission is “To provide the highest quality health services in partnership with Native people.” SEARHC Juneau staff, five Juneau Native organizations, SEARHC Lifestyle Balance program, SEARHC Wise woman program, and all SEARHC beneficiaries were the intended audience. With Obesity becoming an inter-generational epidemic, families needed a safe outlet to be active together during the winter months, particularly because days are short (darkness descends at 4 pm before people get off work), sidewalks are snow and ice covered, and limited opportunities for affordable and accessible indoor physical activities exist.

Alaska Native people were traditionally active hunters and gatherers who ate healthy traditional foods, but today they don't have those same healthy lifestyles. They tend not to join fitness clubs or take fitness classes. They often work in jobs that do not support healthy physical outlets (i.e. athletic club memberships, workout gyms, etc.). They often lack



Charles Clement (2nd from left) Southeast Alaska Rural Health Consortium CEO with SEARHC staff

transportation and rely on the bus system, which doesn't go everywhere. They suffer from many health problems as a result. Walking a total of 150 minutes each week for at least 10 minutes at one time is recommended by the Centers for Disease Control. Walking is something almost anyone can do, it doesn't require a lot of specialized clothing and/or equipment, and it can be done almost anywhere. And January is a good time to start.

Solution

With budget cuts underway, the event needed to be low cost. The outcome needed to show that the SEARHC-funded walking membership was cost effective or it was in danger of being discontinued. Alaska Native walkers greatly increased their attendance at the Dimond Field House while they worked to achieve their walking and health goals.

Results

People who walked gave amazing testimonials of families walking together, inspiring each other, and healing together. One family reported that a husband, in his 6th month of recovery from removing prostate cancer, was walking with his wife and daughter, both of whom were one year post separate surgeries. They described some days as good, lots of days not so good, but through it all they continued to make the effort to walk. Making the effort for and with each other was what was important to these dedicated walking families. Walkers also reported feeling less jiggly, feeling their clothes fit looser, feeling better about themselves, and having fun with friends and family.

Future Directions

Alaska Native people can experience the joy of walking and being active all year long. SEARHC hopes to continue to develop and/or encourage participation in local walking events throughout the year, including the running/walking events scheduled by the local running club during almost every weekend in the summer. Combining the kick-start indoor track event in January with a first-Saturday in June Walk/Run event will help people continue walking throughout the summer and fall. The spirit lodge drumming was a culturally relevant element that was added. The logo on the provided water bottles seemed to resonate with walkers: "Find the Beat that Makes you Move. Be Strong in Mind, Body, and Spirit." Almost everyone said they would do it again in a heartbeat.



"I come even when I don't want to, because I know I'll feel better!"

- Barbara

"Very awesome. First week I did 9 laps, tonight I did 27 laps. I'm getting stronger!"

- Tom



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If you would like to hear more information, contact the Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium at www.searhc.org