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Healthy Lifestyles Focus of Obesity Prevention Program

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Obesity among children and adults has reached epidemic proportions in the United States. This condition has proven difficult to treat effectively, especially in terms of sustainable weight loss. With funding from USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), a cooperative effort from individuals in Wyoming, Idaho and Montana created a novel way to achieve healthy weight by focusing on healthy lifestyle—the Wellness IN (WIN) the Rockies program. >>

Children need supportive environments in order to achieve a healthy adult weight. While family situations are pivotal, school and community environments also have significant impacts. Thus, the project embarked on multidimensional, community-based efforts. It also prompted a national discussion of the obesity issue and the need for multidimensional approaches in both research and education.

A University of Wyoming-based research team developed the WIN the Rockies project to emphasize a health-centered approach that focused on three key parameters: physical activity,

body image and food choice behaviors. While elementary-school children were a targeted intervention group, programs and policies throughout the community were assessed relative to their impacts on the three parameters.

In a cross-sectional survey at the end of the project, 5.6 percent of those in the intervention communities reported changing lifestyle behaviors while only 0.6 percent in the comparative communities reported changes. Based on these and other findings, this intervention approach made a considerable difference in changing the eating habits of this community.

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Right: Boy and his Father during filming for the WIN the Rockies Physical Activity video.

Credit: S. Moore and S. Pelican



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Right: Walk to School Day in Lewistown, MT.
Credit: S. Moore and S. Pelican



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The preliminary study found that adults in these rural communities with a higher Body Mass Index were more likely to drink sweetened beverages, order super-sized portions, eat while doing other activities and participate in less physical activity. Body dissatisfaction was associated with a decreased likelihood to participate in physical activity.

Primary prevention is a top priority when educating about obesity, but treatment efforts need to focus on improving health. The project engaged local citizens and gave them access to a number of different community-based intervention techniques. Communities initiated physical activities, such as walking programs. In preparation for the activities, project staff distributed pedometers to help motivate and reinforce behavioral change. Strategically placed billboards replaced counter-productive advertising with messages about valuing health. Simultaneously, health awareness programs in the schools encouraged students to take this important health message home to influence family

behavior. WIN the Rockies team members served as catalysts to community change, but local leaders emerged to assure long-term viability of the programs for the community.

A Web site developed during the WIN the Rockies project continues to impact research and education about healthy lifestyles and weight. The Web site offers resources at no cost to educators and health care providers. WIN the Rockies is being integrated into existing programs and services to extend the influence of the project well into the future. For more information, visit <http://www.uwyo.edu/wintherockies>.

CSREES funded this research project through the Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems (IFAFS) program. CSREES advances knowledge for agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being, and communities by supporting research, education and extension programs in the Land-Grant University System and other partner organizations. More information about CSREES programs related to obesity can be found online at www.csrees.usda.gov/obesityhealthyweight.cfm. ■

IFAFS was authorized to establish a research, extension and education competitive grants program to address agricultural genomics, food safety, value-added products, biotechnology, rural resource management and farm efficiency and profitability.