

THE CHRONICLE

Lorain County United Way announces Thrive health initiative

Jodi Weinberger | The Chronicle-Telegram

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WELLINGTON — At the Cheese Heritage Festival this year, the village's annual salute to dairy, one item seemed out of place among the fried, stringy, melted offerings: veggies and hummus.

It wasn't a best seller, said Jenny Arntz, executive director of Main Street Wellington — how could it be with the dozens of cheesecakes and hybrid creations of buttery grilled macaroni and cheese options? But Arntz said it didn't go unnoticed, either, and some even expressed appreciation for the lighter fare.

United Way Executive Director Bill Harper talks Thursday about Thrive, a community collaborative focused on improving the health of residents living in southern Lorain County at the Lorain County Community College Wellington Center. It's no accident that carrot and celery sticks made an appearance at the July celebration; the vegetable invasion was just the first sign of many to come of a new collaborative to make southern Lorain County residents healthier.

United Way of Greater Lorain County announced Thursday its partnership with the YMCA of Greater Cleveland and 16 other organizations called Thrive with a shared vision of improving the health of the residents they serve.

The initiative will start with a focus on Wellington, but eventually will expand to include Brighton, Camden, Huntington, Pittsfield, Rochester and Wellington townships and the villages of Rochester and Kipton.

According to the group, data show that 69 percent of adults in southern Lorain County are obese and 24 percent are smokers, both higher than the country average. The poverty rate is also as high as the poorest urban areas of the county. People have heard about food deserts, said United Way's executive director Bill Harper, where options for healthful food are severely limited, and now the group is introducing a new term "exercise desert" into the descriptors for southern Lorain County.

"Our clients desperately need good nutrition and physical activity, and don't have the means to pay for it," said Joyce Scott, a human services worker from Salvation Army.

The goal of Thrive is to make choosing the healthier option easier, the group explained.

Mark Rosemark, Wellington's interim village manager, said new bicycle racks and watering stations were recently installed near parks to entice people to ride instead of drive. Christine Matusik-Plas, the liaison between Thrive and United Way, said cooking demonstrations are now a regular feature at the Wellington Farmers Market, where people can watch chefs make a healthy meal and then get all the ingredients at the market. The village is also working to get fresh produce into corner stores.

Long-term goals include highlighting "heart healthy menu options" at restaurants, adding healthy options in vending machines, creating outdoor walking options within each township's boundaries and providing exercise classes at community events.

All of the leaders agreed that transportation and a wage gap in southern Lorain County are the biggest challenges to improving health outcomes for residents. Cindy Andrews, executive director of Oberlin Community Services, said the nonprofit organization started a bicycle share program for people to use for exercise or transportation that could be duplicated in other municipalities.

Many might think that a rural area would provide plenty of places for walking or riding, but that's not true, said Matusik-Plas, when the speed limit on the roads is 55 mph. With that in mind, solutions to get people exercising and eating better will be tailored to the individual community.

"We've got to carve out different ways to get people on their feet," she said.
<http://chronicle.northcoastnow.com/Local-News/2016/07/29/Lorain-County-United-Way-announces-Thrive-initiative.html>