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United Way collaborative focuses on healthy living for southern Lorain County residents



Bill Harper, president of United Way of Greater Lorain

County, and Charity Butch, Lorain County executive director of YMCA of Greater Cleveland, announce “THRIVE!” A collaborative effort to improve the health of Southern Lorain County residents, July 28, 2016. Eric Bonzar—The Morning Journal

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Bill Harper, president of United Way of Greater Lorain County, and Marilyn Hill, project coordinator for the Lorain County General Health District, discuss “THRIVE!” A collaborative effort to improve the health of Southern Lorain County residents, July 28, 2016. Eric Bonzar—The Morning Journal

A new community collaborative focused on bringing a sustainable, healthier lifestyle to communities in southern Lorain County was introduced to the public July 28 by the United Way of Greater Lorain County.

THRIVE! Southern Lorain County is the 10th community collaborative supported by United Way. The lead agency among the 18 involved is the YMCA of Greater Cleveland. Other organizations include nonprofits, municipalities, churches and fitness centers.

Bill Harper, executive director of United Way, kicked off the press conference at the Lorain County Community College Wellington Center by expressing his excitement in seeing the partners’ hard work come to fruition.

“They’re working on a vision to create a healthier future for all,” he said.

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Some of the goals for the first year include making the farmers’ market in Wellington stronger, developing green space, creating community gardens and creating biking and walking paths. A grant provided through United Way will give THRIVE! at least \$82,000 to work with each year for the next three years. Harper said the organizations that joined to create THRIVE! will also be sharing resources.

Communities who will reap the benefits of the new community collaborative include Brighton Township, Camden Township, Huntington Township, Kipton Village, Pittsfield Township, Rochester Township, Rochester village, Wellington Township and Wellington Village.

Charity Butch, Lorain County executive director with the YMCA of Greater Cleveland, explained how the group worked tirelessly for two years to get to this point.

“Our organizations coming together mean a coordinated approach to access to healthy living resources,” she said. “We started work with a common mission to make our communities healthier through improved nutrition, increased physical activity and informed behavioral health.”

Although members of THRIVE! have been working for about two years to bring a sustainable, healthier lifestyle to southern Lorain County, the Lorain County General Health District has been focusing on improving the health of residents in the area for more than seven years.

Marilyn Hill, a health educator with the district and project coordinator of Creating Healthy Communities, explained how the Live Healthy Southern Lorain County group worked to address the prevention of chronic disease such as heart disease and diabetes through increased physical activity opportunities and increased access to healthy foods.

“We are very excited now to become part of THRIVE!, to join this initiative and to be able to leverage resources with a common goal,” she said, explaining how the partnership takes the health districts’ initiative to the next level. “Our mission is to create communities where the healthy choice is an easier choice and we feel we can do that as we join with the partners of THRIVE!.”

Hill said the name “Live Healthy Southern Lorain County” will dissolve, but those involved will continue to work with THRIVE! toward access to healthier lifestyle options and disease prevention.

Butch said transportation is first and foremost when it comes to barriers to access to healthy options. Amy Szmania, coordinator of the LCCC Wellington Center, said awareness of what’s available as far as transportation and health care is another barrier.

THRIVE! intends to focus on Wellington, the availability of fresh foods at corner store establishments and the possibility of offering free healthy cooking demonstrations to the public in the first year, but Butch said the goal is to visit each individual community to address its specific needs.

“It’s not one size fits all,” she said, referring to the many village and townships in southern Lorain County.

Butch said the grant money allotted through the United Way will give THRIVE! the flexibility to tailor what they’re doing to each community.

“At this point we’re celebrating, however, we’re preparing for the work,” she said, adding that not one partner is intimidated by the amount of work necessary to make a change. “We just keep going because we love what we do. This is the best part of my job.”

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