

A healthier hometown Friday, December 10, 2004

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**By Adewale Troutman**

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Recent health studies and news reports have driven home an irrefutable fact — far too many of us are carrying excess weight and don't engage in enough physical activity. █

As Louisville became the 16th largest city in America, Kentucky became the nation's fourth fattest state. A report released by the Governor's office in July found that approximately 62 percent of Kentucky's adults and 71 percent of the state's African-American adults were either overweight or obese, increasing their risk for health problems such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some cancers. This is higher than the national average of 57.7 percent overweight and obese adults.

Perhaps even more disturbing is the increasing number of our children debilitated by lack of exercise and excessive weight. Nearly one-third of Kentucky's schoolchildren are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight. Here in Louisville, a recent survey done by the Health Promotion Schools of Excellence found that over 25 percent of the children were either overweight or obese.

We are now seeing diseases such as Type 2 diabetes and heart disease in our children, problems formerly associated with middle and old age. If these trends continue, this generation of children may actually have a shorter average life span than that of its parents.

The facts are there — our excess weight and lack of physical activity are having devastating health consequences for us and for our children. The question is, "What do we do about it?" The Mayor's Healthy Hometown Movement may hold some answers.

The Mayor's Healthy Hometown Movement is a community-wide effort to motivate Louisville Metro citizens to increase their level of physical activity and to adopt healthier lifestyles. The Mayor's Movement strives to make a physically active lifestyle and good health habits the norm, rather than the exception, throughout our community.

Just as community norms regarding the acceptability of smoking have been finally changing in recent years, the Mayor's Healthy Hometown Movement seeks to change norms in Louisville Metro regarding the importance and desirability of physical activity and healthy living.

Since being rolled out in September, the Mayor's Movement has already seen some successes. The first round of the Take Charge Challenge has just been completed among Metro Government employees. The Take Charge Challenge is a worksite wellness initiative that uses a team as well as a personal approach to motivate people to become more physically active.

Participants set personal goals for regular activity, ranging from moderate to vigorous activities beginning with less challenging activities such as yard work to more intense ones such as

running and swimming. The key is for participants to begin at a level of activity that they can manage and achieve success with.

Nearly 800 employees representing a wide range of Metro government departments have successfully completed the first phase of the Take Charge Challenge. The initiative is now being replicated among employees at General Electric and at the University of Louisville. I invite other employers in the community who are interested in setting up Take Charge Challenge programs at their worksites to phone the Health Department at 574-6520.

Several other initiatives are also working under the umbrella of the Mayor's Healthy Hometown Movement. The Ford-United Auto Workers initiative is a pilot project to study the effects of an intensive worksite wellness program. Tap Into Fitness promotes fitness in selected public schools through music and exercise. Fit for Me empowers lower-income teen girls with after-school fitness programs integrated with life skills training. Active Living By Design is planning paths for walking and biking in the Clarksdale, Shelby Park and Smoketown neighborhoods.

Neighborhood groups can also become involved in the work of the Mayor's Healthy Hometown Movement through an \$80,000 mini-grant program. Through the community's eight Neighborhood Places, grants ranging from \$500- 1,000 will be awarded to groups and associations based on criteria currently in development. Details on the mini-grant program will be available by early January.

A major focus of the Mayor's Healthy Hometown Movement will also necessarily be policy change that supports the expansion of fitness activities and healthy living. Policies must emphasize the role of physical education, especially in the K-12 grades. There needs to be a dramatic expansion of public transportation such as light rail and safe bike paths with park-and-ride facilities throughout the area. Community planning that supports these goals must be a major part of future development.

No one is so naïve as to believe that true change in our community will occur overnight. The Mayor's Healthy Hometown Movement is just that — a movement. It is not a flash-in-the-pan quick fix. The Mayor's Movement will grow at first slowly, but steadily. It will focus on the many opportunities to make our lives more active — by making use of our beautiful parks, or the area's many hiking and biking trails, or through a whole host of existing and new venues.

The Mayor's Movement will repeatedly send the message that physical activity and healthy living are necessary, and desirable, and even fun. Slowly, the citizens of Louisville Metro will adopt this message, making it their own. Over time, the Mayor's Healthy Hometown Movement will make us a more fit, healthier and happier community.

For more information on how you can join the Mayor's Healthy Hometown Movement, visit the Web site at <http://loukymetro.org/HealthyHometown>

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