

Allentown gets \$80,000 to fight obesity

City is one of 10 across the country to get such a grant. A committee will look for policies that will help keep residents healthy.

By Ann Wlazelek
Of The Morning Call

A year from now, Allentown could require city restaurants to remove artery-clogging trans fats from menus, its schools to add daily physical activity for students and faculty, and the city to install more sidewalks and playgrounds.

That's because the city has won a \$80,000 grant to combat obesity and chronic diseases. Allentown is one of 10 cities nationwide and the only city in Pennsylvania to get the grant.

"The sky is the limit," said city nutritionist Tina Amato about policy changes Allentown could make.

Amato, who is in charge of nutrition and physical activity for the Allentown Health Bureau, announced the award from the national Association of Chronic Disease Directors and the YMCA of the USA at a news conference in the city Monday.

The first-time grant attracted 127 applicants, including Erie, York and Montgomery County, she said.

Other recipients are in Iowa, Kansas, Maine, New Mexico, New York, North

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Carolina, Ohio, Texas and Washington.

The health bureau will share the grant with the Allentown YMCA & YWCA. The money will be used by a committee representing local and state governments, education, health care and the food industry to develop policies.

The committee, called the Allentown CHART Team, includes Allentown Mayor Ed Pawlowski and parks Director Greg Weitzel. All will travel to Alexandria, Va., in June for a two-day training program and to set a course of action specific to Allentown.

Pawlowski said the city already has a wealth of parks, and some new school district policies to provide healthier cafeteria selections, snacks and fundraising foods to improve the health of residents, especially the 40 percent of young people who are overweight or at risk of being overweight.

The grant, he said, affords Allentown the money and direction to do even more.

City officials cited as examples New York City's ban of trans fats in restaurants, some fast-food chain's postings of calorie and nutritional value of its selections, and a desire for more urban playgrounds

or farmers market selections in the city.

Amato said she has plenty of policy changes she would like to see, but must let the committee decide what to recommend.

"It's not about adding another weight-loss or aerobics class," she said.

Leslie Best, director of health promotion and risk prevention for the Pennsylvania Department of Health, agreed that it's no longer good enough to set goals and simply tell Americans they should be more active and they shouldn't eat sweet, fatty foods with little nutrition.

"This is Allentown's chance to become a real leader ... a test tube for policy changes," she said at the new conference at City Hall.

Veronica Elias, chief executive of the Allentown Y, cited the city's leaders and long-standing relationships as tipping the scales in favor of receiving the federal grant.

"It was a no-brainer," she said the grant agencies told her.

And although committee members have been selected, Elias and Amato said they would welcome assistance from others to help implement the plans after the team returns in June.

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