

## Conference targets rising obesity rate in San Joaquin Valley

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SACRAMENTO — Audience members attending a presentation at the Great Valley Center conference Thursday offered some ideas for combating obesity in the San Joaquin Valley.

Among the suggestions:

Urging city councils to include community gardens in urban planning.

Establishing school gardens where students learn to grow produce and burn calories tending the rows.

And creating a loan fund for convenience store owners to buy refrigerators, so they can sell fresh produce to customers.

Earlier this year, six San Joaquin Valley counties were awarded a three-year, \$2.6 million grant from the California Endowment for the newly created Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program.

The project will address high rates of obesity in the region.

In addition to the primary grant, \$300,000 will be devoted to specifically combat obesity in Merced County.

Other counties in the project are Madera, Fresno, Kings, Kern and Tulare, which are teamed with Merced in a regional public health partnership.

Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties are not part of the partnership formed in 1998 by the six southern-most counties in the valley. But there is interest in the northern counties joining their southern neighbors. If they do, they could be eligible for future rounds of funding for the obesity project, said Steve Chambers, a health planner for Kern County.

The obesity project was discussed Thursday at the annual conference, which brought together people in local government, urban planning, business, public health and other sectors to talk about valley issues.

According to 2003 data, the number of overweight and obese teenagers in the valley was 23 percent higher than the statewide rate of 12.4 percent, and the prevalence of obesity in adults age 18 to 64 was 14 percent above the state figure of 55.5 percent. The increasing occurrence of obesity is greatest among Latinos, American Indians and blacks.

Excess weight puts about 15 percent of teenagers and 63 percent of adults in the valley at greater risk of heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and other illnesses. Because of poor eating habits and inactivity, the main causes of obesity, children in the valley are facing life expectancies shorter than their parents', health experts say.

The obesity project will try to succeed where other programs have failed. Despite numerous public health and education programs, the percentage of overweight children rose 6 percent statewide from 2001 to 2004,

according to the nonpartisan Center for Public Health Advocacy.

Genoveva Islas-Hooker, coordinator for the obesity project, said a staff member will be hired and assigned to each of the public health departments in the six counties. The staff members will recruit community groups and organize obesity prevention councils in the counties to design efforts for promoting good nutrition and exercise.

Major goals are to educate policy makers in the six counties about obesity and its causes, and to influence environmental changes, such as clearing litter from parks to encourage recreational activities or making fresh produce available in isolated communities.

Besides Fresno and Bakersfield, much of the population in these counties is spread among impoverished rural communities. Many residents don't have supermarkets or farmers markets nearby. Their diets often consist of fatty foods purchased at convenience stores that are not stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables, Islas-Hooker said.

The project participants might borrow an idea from the "Nutrition on the Go" program in Tulare County. The volunteers travel to small towns to set up farmers markets.

Project participants will have barriers to overcome in spreading the healthy lifestyle message in a region in which 28 percent of people age 25 and older do not have high school diplomas and 22 percent live in poverty.

The health information will be provided in the primary language and at the reading level of targeted populations, officials said.

Chambers said the six counties formed the Central California Public Health Partnership in 1998 because individually they didn't have a chance of securing major grants for health initiatives. Their combined population is about 3.5 million, similar to that of Orange County, and that helps the counties go after grant money.

**Any groups interested in the obesity project in Merced County may contact Coordinator Genoveva Islas-Hooker at 559-228-2159 or [gislas@csufresno.edu](mailto:gislas@csufresno.edu).**

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