



LPRD is taking steps to benefit the health of Lawrence

By Andrew Ruszczyk

Since its inception in 1946, Lawrence Parks and Recreation Department has strived to create an environment that promotes healthy habits, healthy eating and healthy lifestyles. With new challenges presenting themselves daily, LPRD hopes that with the help of the community, the department will continue to face these challenges head on, offering the citizens of Lawrence new programs, initiatives and projects to help enhance their everyday quality of life.

Ernie Shaw, director of Parks and Recreation, thinks the department plays a pivotal role in educating the public.

"We know we have health epidemics such as obesity, and we have all different ways to help with fighting it," Shaw said. "If we don't take steps to improve the health of our citizens based on what we know, then shame on us."

Earlier this year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 35.7 percent of adults and 16.9 percent of children 2 years old to 19 years old in the United States are obese. In Kansas, 29.4 percent of adults are obese, while among adolescents in 9th grade through 12th grade, 12.4 percent are obese. With the percentage of obese individuals expected to increase over the next 10 years, LPRD is being proactive in their efforts to provide

citizens the proper tools needed to build a healthy life. As Amanda Coufal, nutrition education program assistant for LPRD, said, the key to building healthy lives starts with the youth of the community.

"If the recent trends continue, it's feared that the next generation of kids will not outlive their parents," Coufal said. "I think it is important to start nutrition education at a young age because it is easier to create healthy habits while they are young, rather than try to fix unhealthy habits later in life."

One of the ways LPRD has helped youth in the community be health conscious is through implementing the innovative program The OrganWise Guys into youth camps and the Summer Playgrounds program. Since the program's establishment in 1993 in Atlanta, The OrganWise Guys have developed a national presence, with their curriculum in more than 20 states. With fun character names such as Hardy Heart, Madame Muscle and The Kidney Brothers, The OrganWise Guys are a way to let kids connect with the organs inside their body to let them see what they need to do to be healthy. Coufal said The OrganWise Guys program gives kids a reason to take care of their bodies.

"The kids establish a connection with the characters, so they have a reason to take care of themselves because they feel like they know Hardy Heart and they want him to be healthy," she said.

LPRD offers more than 450 classes and programs each season. With most of these classes focusing on exercise and physical health, the department saw a need for more classes to emphasize wellness and nutrition. Starting this fall, new nutrition education and wellness courses have been added for all ages to educate citizens not only on health and nutrition but also on overall wellness.

Jo Ellis, recreation instruction supervisor, thinks wellness classes are a critical part of educating the community.

"It is important for the public to be informed about healthy choices and how they affect them and their families," Ellis said. "The more educational aspects we can provide pertaining to their overall health, the better off everyone will be."

LPRD also offers wellness and health classes for special populations. According to a report released by the University of Illinois at Chicago's Department of Disability and Human Development College, children and adults with disabilities are at a greater risk of becoming obese because they are physically less active. Through the use of the OrganWise Guys program, sport camps and other creative fitness activities held throughout the year, special populations are having equal opportunity to learn about health while being physically active as well.

Annette Deghand, special populations supervisor, understands how important activity and wellness are to this group.



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“I think it's extremely important that I provide programs that offer them fitness, movement education and nutrition,” Deghand said. “Because we've become sedentary as a society, I think the programs we offer and the benefits are vital to keeping people active and fit.”

In addition to the new programs for health and wellness, LPRD is also spearheading community health initiatives designed to benefit the community for years to come. A major initiative that the department is focusing on is healthy alternatives for food and beverages at LPRD concession stands and vending machines. For people who are concerned about their health, the new concession stands will feature healthy food and drink options that will be required to meet nutritional standards adopted by LPRD.

The new changes will impact vending machines located at all LPRD recreations centers and complexes, as well as the concession stands at Holcom Sports Complex, Youth Sports Complex, Clinton Lake Sports Complex and the Lawrence Recreation Center at Rock Chalk Park.

With the new initiatives and standards being adopted, LPRD is committing to high standards not only in the recreation field, but also nutrition. As Tim Laurent, recreation operations manager said, adopting the new standards will help encourage healthy habits.

“By instituting these nutritional standards, we hope to encourage healthier lifestyles by offering smarter food choices,” Laurent said. “People will start seeing things, such as salads and wraps that weren't seen at our concession stands in the past.”

Though challenging, Shaw sees instituting the new options as a no-brainer.

“Although at first, it might seem scary to dive into offering healthy options, it is an absolute necessity,” Shaw said. “If done right, we have seen from others that have made the switch that profits can rise, and if we don't practice what we preach, how can we expect others to do the same?”

With new programs in place and new initiatives set to launch, LPRD is gaining recognition outside the community for its commitment to wellness. This fall, LPRD received the Organizational Health Champion Award presented by Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback for exceptional contributions to promoting fitness in Kansas. The department has also twice received the BlueCHIP Award from Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas and the Kansas Recreation and Park Association. The BlueCHIP Award is given out in three categories based on population and recognizes Kansas communities that encourage and support healthy lifestyles through programs, initiatives, policies and community involvement.

The department has also twice been named a Playful City USA community by KaBOOM! and the Humana Foundation. Lawrence is one of only 217 cities nationwide to receive the designation, which is a national recognition program honoring cities and towns investing in children through play.

Doug Vance, former director of Kansas Recreation and Park Association, sees Lawrence as a leader in health and wellness across the state of Kansas.

“Without question LPRD has an outstanding reputation statewide as an agency that makes a difference,” Vance said. “Now, with the emphasis on healthy lives, LPRD understands its role on con-

necting the community, and sets itself as a model that other agencies look up to.”

All over Lawrence, LPRD strives to meet the community's needs. By developing partnerships with local organizations and schools, the department is ensuring that programs can be accessed by anyone wishing to participate. By offering classes to employees of Lawrence Memorial Hospital, USD 497 and Bert Nash, along with bringing the OrganWise Guys to local preschools, LPRD is reaching out to the community.

By partnering with local businesses, Ellis believes that LPRD programming is reaching individuals that may not have utilized programs in the past.

“By collaborating with various organizations in the community, we can bring the programs to their worksite and reach to greater number of people,” she said. “This is a huge benefit for the employees because they do not have to travel to get their exercise.”

Through partnerships, offering new wellness classes, focusing on nutrition and developing new curriculum, LPRD is committed to sustaining healthy habits, healthy eating and healthy lifestyles for years to come. Roger Steinbrock, marketing supervisor, thinks LPRD is taking the right steps to help the community.

“As a society, we are into preventive care, and educating the community on how to prevent illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes through physical activity and nutrition education,” Steinbrock said. “We have developed quality programming for fitness, but now we have that balance by adding the element of nutrition. The idea that what you fuel yourself with will not only help you in your workout, but in your daily life as well.”