Program Inspires Thousands to Walk for Health

Obesity and chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and some cancers are on the rise across the United States. New York is no exception: the percentage of overweight or obese adults in New York state increased from 42% in 1997 to 58% in 2004. According to CDC's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), about 58,000 New York residents are diagnosed with diabetes each year, including 7400 in Broome County in 2004. BRFSS data from 2005 indicate that 36% of Broome County residents reported being overweight and 28% reported being obese.

Research shows that moderate physical activity such as walking offers substantial health benefits, including reducing the risk of developing high blood pressure and diabetes. Supported by CDC funding and technical assistance, Steps to a HealthierNY–Broome County conducts a walking program that has enrolled 50,000 participants. Called B.C. Walks, the program has increased the percentage of residents who get the recommended levels of 30 minutes of physical activity a day.

Resident Alan Wilmarth credits B.C. Walks and CDC's Steps Program for saving his life. "If it were not for the Steps Program in Broome County, I might not be alive today," said Wilmarth, a hospital administrator who struggled with high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Since enrolling in B.C. Walks in 2003, Wilmarth has walked for exercise every day and lost 60 pounds. He also serves as an unofficial ambassador for the Steps Program, donating more than 200 hours of volunteer service by participating in walks and media events. His walks are featured in the "Where's Wilmarth Walking?" series that is broadcast weekly on the local TV news. Wilmarth leads walks with residents and community leaders throughout the county, at schools, work sites, parks, churches, and neighborhoods. He has even led walks with all 19 Broome County legislators.

Based on Broome County's recent BRFSS surveys, from 2004 to 2006, the percentage of residents who walked for 30 minutes or more, five days a week, increased from 53% to 61%. Broome County Health Department officials cite B.C. Walks for much of that increase.

The success of B.C. Walks inspired all four New York Steps communities to develop similar walking programs. B.C. Walks also illustrates how CDC works with local communities to develop model programs for addressing chronic diseases. To help other communities across the nation develop effective health promotion interventions, this year the Steps Program will host Action Institutes, which will disseminate evidence-based policy and environmental strategies related to obesity, nutrition, and physical activity.

To learn more about successes in the Steps Program, go to: www.cdc.gov/steps/success_stories/index.htm.

Broome County resident Alan Wilmarth leads a group walk