

Fitness and Fellowship Combine for Better Health

As a minister in East Harlem, Joan Williams-Jarrell is always looking for new ways to bring people together. She also wanted to be more physically active but had a hard time getting to the gym. So when she found a program that brings church members together to walk for fitness, it was a match made in heaven.

Through the New York City Department of Health's "Walkers for Wellness" program, Joan and a group of congregants meet three times a week. They walk and talk along a 1.5-mile route through Harlem or Central Park. "It allows us to have fellowship and be physically active at the same time," said Joan.

She and her congregants also learn how to eat better through the program. Cooking demonstrations, for example, have taught them how to use herbs for flavor instead of salt. They have also learned to control portion sizes and avoid sugary drinks.

Joan's group is among the more than 12,000 people in 119 faith organizations that have taken part in "Walkers for Wellness." The program is just one of several aimed at making healthy living easier across the country and is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

New York City has also worked to make the 800,000 meals served daily in its public schools more nutritious. In addition, the city has launched a salt-awareness campaign educating consumers to compare labels and buy foods with less sodium. The effort has increased access to fresh fruits and vegetables in 46 grocery stores located in places where healthy foods were once scarce.

"Physical activity and eating well are essential to health, but, in many communities, that can be a challenge," said Leonard Jack, Jr., PhD, MSc, director of CDC's Division of Community Health. "Programs like 'Walkers for Wellness' bring communities together to overcome hurdles and make healthier living easier for all Americans."

For Joan, the "Walkers for Wellness" program has made a big difference in her health and well-being and that of her congregation. She has lost 15 pounds, her high blood pressure is not as high, and her doctor may even take her off blood pressure medication. The best results are that, "I feel better, sleep better, and have more energy," said Joan.

To learn more about ways to get involved in making healthy living easier in your community, visit www.MakingHealthEasier.org.