

## A fresh approach: YMCA team ready to cultivate healthier diets for children

by David Page

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OKLAHOMA CITY – In December, a delegation from the YMCA of Greater Oklahoma City headed to Washington, D.C., to participate in the Pioneering Healthy Communities initiative.

The eight-member delegation from Oklahoma City met with representatives from about 20 YMCAs from across the country. Pioneering Healthy Communities is an initiative of the YMCA of the USA.

The delegation's mission was to decide on a strategic plan to promote healthier

communities within Oklahoma City.

The Oklahoma City Pioneering Healthy Communities team has now developed an action plan focused on improving school-based and after-school programs that support healthy eating and physical activity and increase accessibility of fresh produce.

"After we came back from Washington, we developed a community action plan placing an emphasis on the Oklahoma City Public Schools," said Angela Jones, YMCA of Greater Oklahoma City director of health and wellness. "We are really looking at the schools being the hub of everything we want to happen in neighborhoods and communities."

Karl Springer, superintendent of the Oklahoma City Public School District, and Raul Font, assistant superintendent for Santa Fe South Charter School, are both members of the Pioneering Healthy Communities team.

The group has yet to identify pilot schools for the project. Need will be part of the school selection process – people with lower personal income generally have less access to fresh fruit and vegetables.

Oklahoma City was selected through competitive review as one of 21 YMCAs participating in the Pioneering Healthy Communities initiative because of health issues here, Jones said. Oklahoma was one of the lowest-ranking states in consumption of fruits and vegetables and physical activity, according to the 2008 State of the State Health Report Card.

The YMCA group plans to align with a school and then develop a plan to increase the availability of fresh produce within a 10-mile radius of the school, Jones said.

"While we will be working with the school," she said, "our other key objective will be to influence the availability of fresh produce in our underserved communities."

Within the schools, the group plans to develop a plan for more physical activity and to provide more nutritional alternatives for lunches and vending machines.

"We want to look at competitive foods available at the schools," Jones said.

Within the surrounding community, the team plans to work with neighborhood stores to increase access to healthy eating alternatives.

"We are going to work with corner stores to increase the availability of fresh fruit and vegetables

in the absence of a grocery nearby," Jones said.

The YMCA group is considering a mobile fruit and vegetable service to increase availability.

Affordability is another issue. The group seeks to develop partnerships with nonprofit food providers and farmers' markets as sources for fresh produce. Jones also hopes to recruit corporate partners to help financially.

The core Pioneering Healthy Communities team is still in place and may be expanded.

"We are looking at adding some other people from the food banks and the public school system," Jones said.

Pioneering Healthy Communities is a three-year program.

"We will use the first year from last December to December 2010 to get our strategies in place," she said. "The next two years will be putting the pedal to the metal and getting these things started."

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