

Obesity Prevention Council “Madera In Motion” Sees Safe Neighborhoods As Key To Community Health

Madera, a diverse city of approximately 57,000, is located 18 miles north of Fresno; with about one-tenth that city’s population, Madera prides itself on preserving a small-town feeling. For full-time Crime Prevention Officer Durbin Lloren, personal and institutional relationships are key to achieving public safety goals as part of a broader strategy for improving community health. In partnership with the Madera in Motion Obesity Council and the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP), Officer Lloren is working to change the environment in order to reduce crime and make people of all ages feel safer in their homes and on the streets.

Walking and other daily physical activity are fundamental to a community’s health but numerous barriers can stand in the way. “In terms of walkability,” says Lloren, “some of these older neighborhoods didn’t even have sidewalks until recently, when the redevelopment agency built them with the help of federal and state grants.” Other challenges include gang activity, drug dealing, and violence—all of which make it difficult for individuals and families in Madera to go outdoors and be active.

Because crime is the result of a complex set of factors, prevention demands a complex and coordinated set of efforts across multiple sectors, from local schools and businesses to city and county agencies and elected officials.

In an effort to address these complex issues, the Madera Police Department holds public town-hall meetings two to three times a year on safety concerns in Madera. Officer Lloren helps to lead the meetings along with neighborhood/park watch programs that are beginning to make a difference; and his day-to-day public safety work is informed by community members who care about improving their neighborhoods and environments.

Officer Lloren was first introduced to CCROPP when a group of concerned parents and school officials from Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School invited him to hear their concerns—how they felt unsafe in their neighborhoods and uncomfortable with students walking to school, noting an increase in afterschool fights and gang initiation assaults. A formalized community patrol grew out of this new relationship among school officials, parents, youth, and the police department.

And now middle school students play a leadership role in improving the safety of their community, for example, by pointing out dangerous “hot spots” along routes to and from school.

Every school year, about 10 youth serve as peer helpers, conducting door-to-door visits with residents and performing walkability assessments. In collaboration with Officer Lloren and CCROPP, the youth, parents and school staff developed an effective model that includes parents patrolling the school grounds; parents walking with students; and parents who remain in their homes and keep their windows and doors open to watch children play and get to and from school safely.

“Otherwise the kids can’t go anywhere,” says Officer Lloren, “because their movement is restricted by gang territories. They can’t take a walk without getting hassled or ride a bike without having it stolen. They can’t leave their area of town so they end up sitting at home playing video games.”

In addition to day-to-day hazards, the lack of safe places to be active contributes to serious long-term health problems

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including obesity. Although Madera has seven parks, “you don’t see any children playing there,” says Lloren. “Instead, transients spend their day in the parks and, despite a ban on alcohol, on a given day I might kick out 15 to 20 drinkers from each park.”

Officer Lloren runs the city’s Park Watch Program aimed at addressing residents’ concerns about park safety, graffiti, vandalism, prostitution, poor lighting, and other issues. He stresses, “The most important thing is getting neighborhood residents to meet and talk to each other.”

McNally Memorial Park on the city’s east side had become run-down and attracted gang activity, drug use, and other illegal behavior. This year, neighborhood residents began working with the police department and the parks and recreation department to develop a successful park watch program that provided the tools and skills to recruit local neighbors, churches, and businesses in addressing these issues collectively. Among other strategies, park watch members established a phone

tree whereby they have shared their cell phone numbers with each other as a way to build community cohesiveness and respond quickly to important safety matters.

“It’s really about building relationships and building trust,” says CCROPP Program Community Coordinator Cristina Gomez-Vidal. “The residents are the eyes and ears of the park—they can see things that the police can’t see from the outside. And, since not everyone is an English speaker, we provide interpreters at the meetings so that they can participate every step of the way. You see the impact when they open up their cell phones and program in their neighbors’ and police department’s phone numbers. Parents are now reporting that they’re seeing a difference in the kinds of activities in the park, and that they feel safer to let their kids out.”

The efforts of Officer Lloren and community residents also extend to creating safer, more healthy communities in the future by developing language for the city’s general plan update—keeping public safety and health

among the city’s official priorities moving forward.

In 2009, Officer Lloren received the CCROPP Cultivator Award for his work on behalf of Madera’s community health.

The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program is the Central California Public Health Partnership’s initiative to create environments that support healthy eating and active living in the San Joaquin Valley. The regional obesity prevention program is administered by the Central California Center for Health and Human Services and is housed under the College of Health and Human Services at California State University, Fresno. CCROPP is funded by The California Endowment.

For more information:

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