Las Cruces Healthy Kids – Conlee Family Fiesta

Partners: City of Las Cruces Public Services Department

Las Cruces Public Schools

New Mexico Department of Health

New Mexico Cooperative Extension

In New Mexico 26% of Hispanic and 32% of Native American adolescents (grades 9-12) are overweight or obese. The incidence of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and progressive liver disease—ailments once associated only with adults—are rising among overweight children. These health risks compound with age, since overweight children and adolescents are more likely to become obese adults. Teaching children at the elementary school level to explore new foods with a healthy diet is one prong of a multi-pronged approach to overall health for the community. A committee made up of the partners listed above did some brainstorming and with the leadership of the City Public Services Department, put together a health related play day for the students and their families.

In November 2009 the four partners saw the completion of a successful first time event to promote healthy activity and health awareness in a targeted neighborhood in Las Cruces.

This is the first time such an event was attempted on a neighborhood wide scale in Las Cruces and with so many players.

Conlee is a school that is a pilot for inserting health related activities into the K-6 curriculum, and has partnered with the Cooperative Extension Unit at New Mexico State University to have children try new foods, and learn about healthy eating options and healthy meal preparation in an effort to combat childhood obesity. The partner’s desire was to reinforce this pedagogical effort with a fun activity that would welcome parents in a predominantly Hispanic, oft times mono-lingual Spanish community adjacent to the governmental institution (school). Many families have been very tentative about contact with formal governmental institutions due to concerns about status, fairness in interactions, immigration concerns, etc. The committee chose a fiesta environment as a friendly, non-threatening venue to deliver a strong message about available resources and healthy choices, with a sub-theme of the school as a welcoming community center.

As part of the “Healthy Kids – Las Cruces” initiative the Fall Family Fiesta took place at Conlee Elementary on November 15, 2008 coordinated by the City of Las Cruces, Conlee Elementary and the Department of Health. Approximately 425 people participated with 168 students registered in a punch card raffle. Two Conlee Elementary students won new bikes provided by the City of Las Cruces Public Services Department and another Conlee Elementary student won a year long free admission pass to the New Mexico State Parks. Two-hundred and three (203) flu immunizations were provided to both children and adults. The school/community garden was dedicated with past, present and future students planting flowers in the garden along with an encouragement to parents and community members to assist with the garden throughout the year. The garden was dug by a City Recreation Section employee, and the soil amended with contributions from the local Home Depot. The garden has been so popular with this neighborhood, that the school is implementing another garden for a separate area of the school grounds in order to expand the gardening experience and teach the link with our food chain to additional grade levels.

The Las Cruces Police Department and Las Cruces Fire Department provided activities that included a bike rodeo, K-9 demonstration, ident-a-child, and blood pressure checks. Twenty-eight agencies set up information and education tables where participants had to receive some type of education in order for their card to be punched to enter the bike raffle. Las Cruces Mayor Miyagishima opened the event announcing his 5-2-1-0 challenge (five fruits/vegetable services, no more than two hours of video/TV, one hour of exercise and zero sodas each day). Conlee Elementary Principal Jennifer Terrazas welcomed all to the event. Lori Grumet, CLC Public Services Director and Principal Terrazas then facilitated the ribbon cutting by Conlee students as the official opening of the event. Mayor Pro-Tem Dolores C. Archuleta was also present throughout the day. The City of Las Cruces staffs through the leadership of Mayor Pro-Tem and Director Grumet were very instrumental and resourceful in providing the variety and magnitude of activities to event participants in promoting healthy life styles. The fiesta goal was to provide education and encouragement to the children, their families and the entire Conlee community to adopt healthy lifestyle choices along with more ownership of the entire Conlee school environment in promoting healthy behavior now and for the future.

The Conlee Family Fiesta was held on the school grounds and included the following booths:

1. NM National Guard
2. High School equivalency Program – UTEP
3. 3 Crosses Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu
4. Guzman Karate
5. Mt. View Market
6. Girls Scouts of Rio Grande
7. NMSU Aggie Softball Players
8. Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley
9. Dona Ana Action for Youth
10. Dona Ana County Cooperative Extension
11. CLC After School Program
12. Kool Smiles Dental
13. CLC Natural History Museum
14. CLC Fire Dept.
15. CLC Police Dept. – Codes, K9 Unit, etc.
16. CLC Animal Control Services
17. Ms. Geri and her face painting
18. NM State Parks
19. Dyslexia Institute
20. Healthy Start – TUPAC
21. Molina Healthcare
22. Peace Lutheran Church
23. Blue Cross Blue Shields
24. NM Dept. of Health
25. Conlee Elementary Staff
26. CLC Recreation Dept.
27. Chris Valenzuela – Music
28. Sportsman’s Warehouse

None of the partners had the resources to address the issue of obesity and healthy eating and life activity alone. By cooperating and coordinating efforts, the neighborhood was provided with convenient health, wellness and safety services in a fun packed day.

Planning is underway to further engage the community surrounding Conlee to participate in promoting healthy choices and it is anticipated that the Family Fiesta, which was a pilot project in the Healthy Kids initiative, will continue to grow and spread to other schools in the district thereby encouraging more children to live happier and healthier lifestyles. Pooling resources and expertise – breaking down institutional barriers was key. The leadership of the City was a driving force in the success of the effort.

The costs for the program consisted of a few hundred dollars for incentives for the children (bicycles), and some overtime for Parks and Facilities staff members to provide electrical and logistic services for the day. Other prizes were donated by the participating entities (flu shots, entertainment, car seat clinic, passes to the state parks, etc.)

The results from this effort include an increased awareness of healthy food options and activities, based on interviews with the school children and their teachers. In addition, it is logical to assume that the 200+ flu vaccines administered resulted in a lower incidence of illness among students and their family members who participated in that service. The ultimate reward from the experience for the community is the continuation of the partnerships and relationships built between the lead partners. There is an open dialog and further programmatic developments are underway to continue the promotion of healthy services and activities in neighborhoods – with the local elementary or middle school acting as the hub. An additional day was conducted in 2009 at Conlee.

Because of the beneficial partnerships formed in the Fall of 2008, the City of Las Cruces and its partners have continued to pursue activities to promote health, such as a growing “Safe Routes to School” effort, shared sports facilities, parks and library spaces, and the efforts have expanded to include innovative recreational programming, including a Play Day for the entire community and designation as a Playful City for 2009 by Kaboom.org.

A major component of *Healthy Kids Healthy New Mexico”* – an initiative of the New Mexico Department of Health is to replicate the local program, “*Healthy Kids-Las Cruces”,* in other communities across the state. Dr. Patti Morris from the Dept. of Health testified on this topic at Sen. Jeff Bingaman’s field hearings on Dec. 3, 2008, in Santa Fe. July 6, 2009 was proclaimed “Healthy Kids – Las Cruces Day” by Council. City leadership is fully engaged in continuing to grow opportunities for the community to participate in healthy activities and education in an effort to continue to combat obesity and its related health issues among the residents of Las Cruces.

