

PARTNERS IN WELLNESS

Program Changes Lives

“Nutrition and lifestyle choices become increasingly more important as we age, and we must adapt to changing needs,” explained Dr. Jackie McClelland, Director of the state-wide Partners for Wellness Program of the N.C. State University and Cooperative Extension Service. “This is a program that literally changes lives.”

Participating counties continue to report successes that make the program worthwhile. Here are a few examples.

HEALTHIER LIVING

Rutherford County Extension Agent Tracy Davis stated, “I think that the program is motivational, and that’s the biggest thing about it. We teach healthy lifestyle concepts and demonstrate how even the smallest changes can make a big difference.” The current program structure makes it possible to provide consistency and follow-up with the participating adults as well.

Four of the older adults that participated in last year’s program each set a personal goal for healthier living. They adopted behavior changes to meet their goals. These changes included reading labels to reduce sodium intake, using new food preparation techniques to reduce fat intake, exercising more often, and consuming more fruits and vegetables. As a result of these changes, one has reduced her high blood pressure, another has better controlled diabetes, and the other two generally feel better and have more energy.

Additionally, participants last year were given thera-bands to use at home to help improve flexibility and strength by increasing activity. A year later, one man reported that he has used the band daily for the past year. He is a fulltime caregiver for his wife who has Alzheimer’s disease. Exercising with the thera-band is the one thing he does for himself every day.

HELPS SAVE LIVES

Alexander County Extension Agent Margo Mosley reported that two patients’ lives were possibly saved due to their participation in the program.

One individual was encouraged to get a dental exam to check for problems in her mouth, since such problems do have an impact on what foods one selects. Tumors were detected and removed, and the early diagnosis prevented possible cancer.

In another case, immediate and accurate information contributed to saving a life. The Check Book for Drug Safety is a pocket-size booklet that lists all prescription drugs and complete information about each one that a person is taking. This was distributed to all participants in the Partners in Wellness Program. When one participant had a stroke, valuable time was saved

because the medics were able to immediately access complete information about drugs she was taking from the Check Book for Drug Safety in her purse.

CREATING BETTER RELATIONS

Agnes Evans, Moore County Extension Agent, noted that Partners in Wellness is a program that impacts people's lives by teaching important nutrition practices to improve health. Participation at the congregate nutrition centers has increased due to word-of-mouth marketing because this program has been so popular.

"It's rewarding to make changes in people's lives," Evans explained. One lesson addresses failing eyesight and the need to use various colors to help one distinguish different items. For example, a colored cutting board allows for white potatoes to be seen easily, so there is less chance of cutting yourself. One woman with failing eyesight had whipped cream on a piece of pie and her napkin beside the plate. She confused the two and said, "Now I know what Agnes was saying about your eyes changing."

When Evans sees some of the participants shopping, she pays attention to what they are buying and has observed them purchasing milk and vegetables. Often they say they are buying the products because they enjoyed them so much at the meetings.

PARTICIPANTS DEMAND THE PROGRAM

The largest program in the state is headed by **Wayne County Extension Agent, Christine Smith**. "We know that the participants are hearing our messages and benefiting from the program," said Smith. "We have seen a dramatic increase in the number of participants at the congregate sites and they are eager to receive the information."

This past year, the focus was on fruit, vegetable and calcium consumption and food preparation. It was meant to be the last year of the program so that Smith could work on other nutrition projects. However, participants had a different plan. "They started circulating a petition to send to Raleigh to keep the program. We responded to their interest and support, and worked out a way to keep things going this past year. Sometimes it's hard to see the impact we are having, but this emphasized the importance of the program to our participants," Smith reported.

"We are so proud of the work that extension agents are doing to improve the health of North Carolina's older adults," summarized Dr. McClelland. "This program demonstrates that anyone can learn and improve his or her own life."