

Get Stronger Live Longer


WHEN HIS CO-WORKERS AT SVR DESIGN COMPANY STARTED putting together teams this spring for the 2009 Group Health Commute Challenge, civil engineer Nathaniel Riedy wanted to join, but was having second thoughts. A regular bus commuter who doesn't own a car, Riedy liked the idea of commuting by bike—from the aspect of getting fit as well as doing something good for the environment—but “the idea of riding in the city with all the cars was a little daunting,” Riedy says, “so I was hesitant to say ‘yes.’” • But SvR, a Seattle-based landscape-architecture, civil-engineering and planning firm, has a culture of committed cyclers. Since 2007 the company, with the help of the Seattle-based Cascade Bicycle Club, has promoted a Group Health Commute Challenge subcontest within Seattle's architectural and engineering communities. So with encouragement from his co-workers, who helped Riedy map out the least-traffic-congested route to his downtown office, and a loaner bike courtesy of his boss, Tom von Schrader, Riedy decided to try it. Part of a seven-person team, Riedy ended up riding all but two of the possible commute days in the month of May. He's since purchased his own bike, rides to work most days and is enjoying the greater freedom a bike affords him. • “Being more active feels good,” Riedy says. “I can ride more places; I'm in better shape; and I'm more awake when I get into work, instead of being sleepy from the bus. If it hadn't been for the Commute Challenge contest, it would have been a lot harder for me to do it.” • For committed athletes, healthy active adults, or someone wanting to get in shape or start a new activity, sometimes the extra element of competition, shared accountability and camaraderie is the essential difference between getting started and never trying. Recognizing this, health-care providers are encouraging their employees to be active and are teaming up with companies such as SvR, with recreational clubs such as the Cascade Bicycle Club and with other organizations to reach a broad audience with campaigns to get people motivated and moving toward better health. Here's a look at four programs aimed at getting and keeping people healthy.

Anchorage

Remember the old adage “Put one foot in front of the other”? This spring, Providence Health & Services Alaska—a network of Alaska hospitals serving Anchorage, Valdez, Seward and Kodiak under the larger Providence umbrella—challenged its employees to walk 200 million steps (roughly 100,000 miles) during its six-week Step It Up For Kids campaign to raise awareness and money to combat childhood obesity.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Adolescent and School Health, the prevalence of childhood obesity in the United States more than doubled from 1980 to 2006 for kids ages 6 to 11, rising from 6.5 percent to 17 percent, while adolescent obesity (ages 12 to 19) more than tripled in that same time, going from 5 percent to 17.6 percent. According to the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, an approximate 36 percent of Anchorage K–12 students are above a normal weight. Overweight children are at high risk for problems such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, joint damage and diabetes, and according to the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 80 percent of overweight kids age 10 to 15 will become obese by age 25.

While Providence held a prize drawing at the end of the Step It Up For Kids campaign, the main benefit for the 1,250 participants was improving their own health, while supporting children in their communities. They used pedometers to log each step, and reported their weekly totals to team captains. Once the goal of



Commuting to work by bicycle is one way to be active and keep fit.



200 million steps was reached, Providence awarded money to local children's organizations targeting childhood obesity.

The CDC recommends taking 10,000 steps a day, the equivalent of about five miles. The average American only gets 3,000 to 5,000. "The idea," says Tammy Green, regional director of health-management services at Providence Alaska, "is to ask people: 'How in your daily life can you incorporate simple changes and increase your activity?'"

For instance, they can take stairs instead of the elevator, or park farther from their destination. Every step counts.

Kaye Nelson, a 51-year-old executive assistant at Providence Alaska, lost about 15 pounds during the six weeks. Afterward, she was inspired to fulfill her dream of walking 302 miles from Houston, Alaska, northeast to Fairbanks as a tribute to her mother, who died of breast and ovarian cancer two years ago.

"My mother believed in wellness and good health," Nelson says, "and this walk is a way of honoring her."

Health-care providers sponsor group activities to promote healthier lifestyles

By Dana Thompson



San Francisco

It's easy for health-care providers to tell clients to eat better, but for many patients, who don't have access to healthy foods, the well-intentioned advice is mere background noise. This was true for residents of a low-income area in southeast San Francisco. But thanks to University of California, San Francisco Medical Center personnel and support from community organizations, healthy food and the subsequent health benefits are now available there.

"We tell people to increase the amount of fruits and vegetables they eat, and yet there is no full-service grocery store that offers fresh produce in the area—mostly just corner stores selling processed food and cigarettes," says Melody O'Donnell, a clinical dietitian at the University of California, San Francisco. She provides nutritional counseling at the Southeast Health Center, a San Francisco Department of Public Health outlying safety-net clinic serving uninsured and underinsured residents in the neighborhood.

O'Donnell's predecessor, Toby Morris, recognized this, and along with clinic director and pediatrician Mark Ghaly brainstormed ways to "practice what they eat" by making the Southeast Health Center Food Pantry resemble a farmers market.

"The San Francisco Food Bank helps us ensure that the Southeast Health Center Food Pantry receives only healthy, whole foods, with nothing

processed," says O'Donnell, who runs the pilot program, now in its third year.

Working in partnership with Southeast Food Access—a conglomeration of individuals, government agencies and community-based organizations—and using San Francisco Food Bank money and food, UCSF grant funds and private donations, O'Donnell and her team of volunteers stock the "market" with fresh fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains, along with tip sheets on storage and recipes in English, Spanish, Russian and Chinese. Operating on a first-come basis, the Southeast Health Center Food Pantry supplies approximately 80 families a week with the equivalent of about 2.4 pounds of nutritious food (or two full grocery bags) per household. Another 10 to 40 families generally get at least something. For the homeless who lack the means to store and prepare food, O'Donnell also provides canned vegetables, can openers, fruit, peanut butter and protein bars, which are minimally processed.

O'Donnell occasionally gets personnel support via medical residents from San Francisco General Hospital, one of the city's main hospitals. The hospital's three-year Primary Care Internal Medicine Residency Program periodically takes future doctors

Clockwise from left: About 10,000 people ride their bikes from Seattle to Portland in an annual event sponsored by Group Health and the Cascade Bicycle Club. Employees of Providence Health & Services Alaska wore pedometers and logged 200 million steps this past spring. The sun shone on participants at the Arizona Distance Classic in March.



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"We train our physicians to be leaders in their communities," says Dr. Sharad Jain, an associate professor of medicine at UCSF and the director of this residency program. "Our goal is for our medical residents to not only be outstanding physicians but to also understand the social context in which their patients' care is delivered. You can't tell people to eat right when the corner store sells alcohol, not fresh produce."

The Southeast Health Center Food Pantry is part of a network of more than 200 pantries in San Francisco and Marin counties, all run by community-based organizations. Fresh produce is provided by all of the pantries year-round. The network collectively distributed more than 2 million pounds of fresh produce in July alone. The Southeast Health Center Food Pantry is unique, however, in its mission of providing almost all whole foods and use of medical personnel to educate people about the role nutrition plays in overall health.

"For now, we know of no other kindred spirits doing exactly this type of work," O'Donnell says, "but we hope that more medical communities and food pantries will work together in providing healthy food while teaching people to eat well for their bodies."

Tucson

If you're healthy and fit and want an active lifestyle, Oro Valley, a suburb of Tucson, is a nice place to live. If you're not in shape but want to be, it also has lots to offer you. Support for getting and staying healthy is a community effort in Oro Valley—extending from the mayor's office, to the local hospital, to a myriad of local businesses.

When Oro Valley Hospital opened in January 2005, the staff evaluated the impact of poor diet, lack of exercise and obesity on their patients' health. The national obesity rates for adults have doubled since 1980, with nearly one-third of U.S. adults—more than 72 million people—considered obese. According to the CDC, the financial burden caused by obesity-related health problems is esti-



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Based on the perceived needs of the local community, Oro Valley Hospital initiated Commit to Be Fit, a health-education-and-support program to help patients meet their health goals. The hospital holds a series of free monthly seminars on the first Thursday of each month, addressing issues such as nutrition, exercise and aging, and provides a motivational booklet and fitness advisers to help people lead healthier lives.

Coincidentally, just as the hospital was launching Commit to Be Fit, John Corbett, a runner and the owner of a local store, All About Running & Walking, was working with John Bingham, a columnist for *Runner's World*, and David Babner, of the sport-event-management firm M3S Sports, to bring a high-profile running event to the area. While the three were discussing the details, Jamie Eggle, the hospital's marketing director, came into the store to discuss sponsoring a 5K walk/run event.

The resultant collaboration, the Arizona Distance Classic, put on by M3S Sports and now in its sixth year, is held every March and features the Valley of Gold Half Marathon, including a wheelchair division, along with the Oro Valley Hospital 5K Run/Walk and a Kid's Fun Run.

Corbett holds a 10-week Commit to Be Fit training program to help people prepare for the Distance Classic. "For some people, it's the first time they've ever done anything like this," Corbett says. "They accomplish something they never thought they could and, hopefully, their success becomes a springboard toward better health."

Oro Valley Hospital encourages employees and patients alike to participate in the event, while supplying personnel for race-day logistical and medical support. Local businesses wave the flag, too, using the Arizona Distance Classic Corporate Challenge as a way to build team spirit. Oro Valley Mayor Paul H. Loomis walked the 5K this year and challenged Oro Valley residents to join him.

Retiree Linda Koral, who does regular strength training and aerobics, decided this year to walk

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FROM PAGE 49 the 5K. “The Commit to Be Fit training program was so well-organized and nonthreatening. By the end of the training, I was ready,” Koral says. “During the race, I felt so good, the 5K wasn’t enough. Next year I’ll do the half marathon.”

Seattle

Seattleites, too, are active, and much of that activity takes place on bicycles. In 2004, Jay Gusick, executive director of communications and community relations for Group Health Cooperative, and Sharon Thomson, executive director of advertising and marketing communications, determined that cycling was the perfect campaign vehicle to promote Group Health’s message of healthy living.

“Our leadership sees the value of cycling, and for a health-care organization, it’s a wonderful match,” says Damien King, Group Health’s community-relations manager. “Anyone from kids to older adults can ride a bike; bicycles are nostalgic, and cycling is good for our brains and our bodies.”

A Washington-based integrated health-care system that provides medical insurance, primary care and specialty care at 26 primary-care medical centers in Washington and Idaho, Group Health sponsors more than 25 rides in Washington, many with the Cascade Bicycle Club, one of the biggest cycling clubs in the United States with more than 11,000 members.

Group Health’s biggest event with Cascade is the Group Health Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic (STP)—a 202-mile two-day ride celebrating its 30th year. This year, there were about 10,000 participants from 46 states and seven different countries, with the oldest participant 87 years old. In 2004, Group Health President and CEO Scott Armstrong, never a big cyclist, decided to ride in the STP as a way to lend his support to cycling as a means to good health. He’s done it five times since.

Cascade and Group Health have also sponsored the Group Health Commute Challenge, one of the largest bike commuter events on the West Coast. Employers are challenged to assemble teams of four to

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10 riders to ride round-trip to work at least five times during the month of May, National Bike Month. In 2009, 737 teams participated, with a total of 10,369 riders logging upward of 1,158,011 miles. Group Health alone had 32 teams with 232 riders who rode nearly 23,402 miles. That's a lot of exercise, not to mention saved gas.

"What I like most about the Group Health Commute Challenge is that it reminds me, after a long winter, to get back on my bike," says Charity McCollum, a Group Health employee. "Once I'm out there, I remember how much I love it: the fresh air, the sounds ... and all the other things that driving a car doesn't provide."

Group Health's list of bicycle-outreach programs goes on. Group Health sponsors three cycling teams, including Team Group Health, an all-female professional cycling team promoting women's health. A new campaign is the Major Taylor Project. Named in honor of Marshall "Major" Taylor, the first professional African-American cyclist to become a world cycling champion, the project is a community partnership between the Cascade Bicycle Club and the King County Department of Transportation's Metro Transit Division, with sponsorship from Group Health, and is designed to make cycling accessible to multicultural youths ages 11 to 18 who might not otherwise have the opportunity to cycle. Thanks to the project, 45 are training with sponsors to complete long-distance rides.

Be Active

These organizations are not alone in their quest to encourage healthy lifestyles through preventive measures such as good food and exercise. Nationwide, hospitals, HMOs, corporations and nonprofits recognize the importance of getting people to be proactive. So whether you are tremendously fit, moderately in shape or needing to get started, remember: The first step may be the hardest, but if it gets you out the door and on the road to a healthier life, it is also the most important. ■

Dana Thompson is a Bainbridge Island-based freelance writer and runner.

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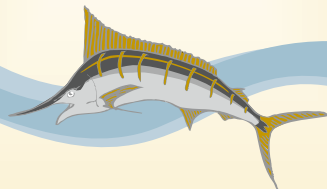
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