

THEory into ACTion

A Bulletin of New Developments in Community Psychology Practice

Community Roles in Preventing Obesity

It's no secret: obesity is a major national health problem, contributing to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, shorter life expectancy, and lowered well-being. Nor is it surprising that researchers from multiple disciplines have been actively investigating obesity prevention, with strategies including parental education, fresh food availability, fitness programs, and legislative advocacy.

A collaboration between a Chicago commission and two community psychologists – Suzette Fromm Reed and Judah Viola of National Louis University – has been making its own distinctive contributions. Its focus is on the schools, key settings for children, where nutritional choices and exercise behaviors shape adult lifestyles. And its solutions are based upon partnership, leadership, and relationship – three simple but powerful psychological principles that make a measurable positive difference.

Partnerships come into play because school administrators are obliged to deal with day-to-day educational issues. So the commission (the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children) joined together with Fromm Reed and Viola to coordinate obesity-prevention planning and interventions across schools. To complement the partnership, the psychologists have shown that individual leaders or “wellness champions,” with a personal stake in the issue, can be most effective in motivating in-house actions in each school. The strengths and success factors shown

by the top-performing schools can then also be modeled by other schools and supporting community organizations.

In addition, success both in partnership operation and individual championing depends upon relationship building and maintenance, both within and across school locations. That's a gradual process: "To create change in schools, we should recognize the time it takes to build relationships; but that pays dividends later on," Viola says. In evaluations, he and Fromm Reed have in fact shown that those schools participating in the partnership for a year or more have experienced the greatest obesity-prevention effects.

Obesity, Fromm Reed and Viola believe, is not just an individual issue, but rather a community issue, calling for application of community change principles. Partnership, leadership, and relationship building are examples; they are not new principles, nor are they difficult to understand, even though implementing them in real-world situations can be more challenging. But documenting their successful use in community practice, and with major social problems, is what makes these researchers' work stand out. The work of these community psychologists lends guidance and confidence to those wanting to create change in other community settings.

For more information about Suzette Fromm Reed and Judah Viola's work, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMJCYjyDR_Y.

This is the first in a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.