

Community Wellness

Healthy City produces 'blizzard' of activity

Fall River —

It's springtime in Fall River but the city is experiencing a blizzard — a blizzard of activity that promises to continue us on the way to being a much healthier place to live and work. From reducing access to drugs, to cleaning up the city, to increased fitness activity and many other projects, Healthy City Fall River is taking the city by storm.

On April 30, 31 organizations were recognized at the fourth annual Healthy City Fall River Spring Celebration, held this year at Our Lady of Light Band Club in the Flint. Department of Public Health Commissioner John Auerbach gave the keynote address in which he praised Fall River for its exceptional work in addressing some of the major public health challenges that the city faces, including a high smoking rate, and high rates of diabetes and heart disease. In that address, he promised the continued assistance of the department in partnering with Fall River to carry out programs to address fitness and nutrition and to continue efforts to address addiction to tobacco, alcohol and other substances.

Mayor Robert Correia also addressed the group and used the analogy of a snowflake to illustrate what combined efforts can do to address these health challenges. He pointed out that a single snowflake can do little but, when combined with thousands of others, it can result in a snow storm that can bring a major city to a halt. He praised the combined efforts of each citizen, as well as the dozens of organizations and city departments that can, working together, transform this city into one that of which we can be proud.

The Healthy City effort in which this city has been engaged over the past five years is beginning to build such a “snow storm” of effort. Since the project began in early 2003, it has identified 165 projects that each address one or more of the five priorities that the people who live and work in Fall River said would need action in order to make the city a healthier place:

- 1) safety and substance abuse
- 2) environment and recreation
- 3) health education
- 4) adult education, job training and employment, and
- 5) community planning and housing.

At this year's recognition event, we recognized four organizations including the BOLD Coalition and the Fall River Police Department for working with the Fall River Tobacco Control Program to develop a strategy to reduce or eliminate the sale of drug paraphernalia that was prevalent in retail markets across the city.

Five organizations were recognized for their work in improving the environment and in increasing the recreational opportunities available to Fall River residents. These included the Mayor's Office for its Operation Clean Up Fall River initiative that has begun to show visible improvements in the cleanliness of the city.

Fourteen organizations were recognized for their work in providing health education to adults and children within the city, including the highly successful Fitness Challenge that involved more than 1,000 people who lost over 3,000 pounds!

Recognition for voluntary services for youth was given to five local organizations, notably to Fall River's Youth Services for the America's Promise program, which led to Fall River being named one of the 100 Best Communities for Youth in the nation.

And recognition went to four organizations for Community Planning and Housing including the Fall River Housing Authority for the Pleasant View renovations and to the Columbus Park Independent Baseball League for their improvements to the Columbus Park ball field.

These 31 programs are only a small part of the bigger picture of more than 160 projects that have been under way in Fall River over the past four years, many of them still in place. For a full list and a complete description of each of these, go to www.HealthyCityFallRiver.org and click on Action Plan Priority Projects. Each of these "snowflakes" has begun to add up to a blizzard of activity in this city that can result in improved health for each of us.

Healthy City Fall River also gave special recognition to two several key community partners — local hospitals and the media. Southcoast Hospital Group and Saint Anne's Hospital were recognized for their support of the recent Integrating Health Behavior Change Conference. The Herald News was recognized for the Living Well section. The Durfee Hilltop was recognized for its special health-related issue.

And, beyond what has already been done, two new projects will soon be launched:

- The city has been awarded a minimum three-year contract by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to reduce heroin use and addiction. In the first year, a community-wide plan will be developed with the input of key players throughout the City. Funding will be provided in future years to implement the plan.
- The City has been awarded a two-year contract by Tufts University to replicate the Shape Up Somerville program, a successful obesity reduction program in grades one through three in Fall River schools. This program, that will begin next September, will provide healthier dietary options and increase opportunities for physical activity for children, both in and out of school.

These programs will be added to recent awards to the Department of Health and Human Services for community and workplace wellness programs, a small senior fitness grant and existing programs to address tobacco use.

In addition to these programs, Healthy City Fall River will issue its fourth call for proposals for its \$500

micro-grants. Approximately 10 projects by local citizens and organizations that address one or more of the five Action Priority Areas will be considered for funding when the call for proposals is issued over the coming summer months. “This is a good time for groups to begin to think about how you might get involved to make Fall River a healthier place to live and work,” commented Dr. David Weed who coordinates the project on a voluntary basis. “We have been amazed by some of the thought and ingenuity that has gone into the proposals we have received over the past four years,” he added. “After all, creating a healthy city is something everyone can become involved in.”

Will all of these efforts be enough to make a difference in Fall River’s significant health challenges? If enough snowflakes can bring a city to a halt, perhaps a “snow storm” of collective effort can begin to halt our decades-long increases in chronic illness and disability.

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