

**BRIEF PROGRESS REPORT: Healthy Tomorrows for Teen Girls at NBHS
February 2007-September 2008**

1) Project Overview and Activities

a) Brief description of problem and services:

Young women in New Britain High School (NBHS), Connecticut's largest high school (3,163 students) face complex factors that increase their risk of obesity and its many serious consequences. Risks include poverty (42% eligible for free/reduced lunch), high drop out rate (23%), the state's highest rate of teen pregnancy, and sedentary lifestyles. Through our work on HT, we have been able to gain a greater understanding of these risks/challenges and design our program to address them with greater sensitivity and effectiveness. A focus group with NBHS girls in 2007 for example, found that:

1. There is stigma attached to losing weight/eating well
2. Work/home responsibilities decrease opportunities to exercise
3. Perceived/actual lack of flexibility in scheduling of after-school activities limit participation
4. Lack of information over exercise exists
5. Group support/encouragement/participation (especially close friends) is vital to increase physical activity
6. Lack of motivation/laziness is a factor
7. Medical issues=barrier to exercise
8. Boredom over routine activities
9. It's important to explain purpose of activity/sport (how it will contribute to healthy life/weight loss)

The purpose of HT for Teens is to address these risks by 1) promoting and sustaining behaviors that prevent obesity and promote lifelong health and 2) empowering girls to mentor their peers and advocate for a school environment where healthy choices are available. Three service components are:

a) one-on-one nutritional counseling and support from a registered dietician for obese or overweight girls identified through the school-based health center or through outreach within the school

- b) leadership/youth development initiatives focused on healthy eating/activity to empower a core group of girls to become advocates/ambassadors for health within their school and community and potentially through their careers;
- c) small group activities and special events to educate and engage girls in healthy eating/activity

b) Principal accomplishments of the project to date and how they were achieved:

- Number of individuals served: 61 girls have participated in one or more of the above activities.
- How many/what types of services:

Nutrition counseling: During the school year, 2007-2008, twenty-five students were seen for individual nutrition counseling. This represented 40% of the females of overall HT participants. Additionally, nutrition programs/classes were provided for a pregnant teen class taught by the culinary arts instructor, Ms. Thomson. This was a Fall presentation, with 8 students in attendance. The class was offered only in the Fall. The presentation focus was on easy, fast and nutritious foods during pregnancy. Reduced-fat cheddar cheese and whole grain crackers with seltzer as a beverage were sampled. Additionally, the registered dietitian met with the school social workers to explain the Healthy Tomorrows program and encourage participation in the program and referral for nutritional counseling. As a result of this meeting, an individual nutrition session was conducted for four young women who participate in a program offered by this department.

The largest Identified barrier/obstacle to initial counseling and ongoing follow-up is inconsistent school attendance. A student not returning for scheduled appointments is another problem. There are numerous reasons for failure to keep appointments. These include: other issues taking precedent, lack of reliability in this age group, a failure to recognize the serious of their obesity, family obligations and lack of family support. Partnering with the YWCA provided another venue for nutrition education. During the summer, Healthy Tomorrows meetings took place at the YWCA. At each meeting, healthy food choices were offered and an activity planned. At the request of the participants, a session was conducted on label reading. This was one of the better attended events with participants very engaged. Yoga proved to be a favorite activity and was offered at two of the sessions.

Leadership/Empowerment Activities:

- Ambassadors Program. This was initiated in summer 2008 for a core group of girls who had participated consistently in one or more of the HT activities and shown interest in becoming program leaders. Five girls were given written invitations to join this group in 06/08—an additional four girls were invited over the course of the summer.

The purpose was to have the group work with our Wesleyan student mentor, Christa Vardaro, and HT team (Jayme Hannay and Paula Leibovitz) on a variety of fun/educational/youth development activities, chosen by the girls themselves, that would provide leadership training, background in healthy eating and physical activity. These would prepare the girls to take a leadership role in organizing HT activities in the 2008-09 school year. Major events of from 06/08 - 08/08 included

- 06/06: a trip to the New Britain Museum of American Art, led by Wesleyan peer mentor and attended by 5 girls. Very positive response by girls who had never visited this museum, which is located in Walnut Hill Park, a great site for exercise, hikes—also never used by girls. We see this as an opportunity for building a cultural partnership with the museum in the future.
- 06/14: Focus group to plan Ambassador activities and yoga/NIA class at the YWCA. Only 2 girls attended (see Challenges).
- 06/26: A repeat of the 6/14 event but with much greater success. About 10 girls attended; 2 parents and several siblings. Yoga class was followed by light supper and a focus group facilitated by U-Conn.
- 7/17: Label reading and focus group. At girls request, Paula Leibovitz led a very successful, interactive session for 7 girls on label reading; she also asked questions related to access to medical home, HT, meeting times for school year activities, etc.
- 08/12: Health Careers Lunch at Community Health Center: Five health providers (CHC's Medical Director, an MD from New Britain, RN, Dental assistant and Administrative Assistant) had lunch with 3 HT Ambassadors. This was an exciting event—although attendance was poor.
- 08/26: Yoga and light supper with Paula: This was “advertised” as an opportunity to relax and regroup before the school year began. 4 girls attended.

Another accomplishment of the summer was submitting an application for \$2500 to GoGirlGo Ambassadors program. The application was written by one of the HT Ambassadors. Awards will be announced in September.

The summer Ambassadors program was a mixed success. While all the activities were designed by the girls themselves and extremely well-received by those who attended, attendance was less than expected at most events. Girls were notified,

repeatedly reminded by email, telephone, etc. but still many were “no shows” without any notice. See “Challenges” below for issue of girls consistent engagement in the program.

▪ Community Service Program.

2007-08 was the pilot year for the Community Service program, which has attracted large numbers of girls who need to fulfill the graduation requirement at NBHS of 20 hours of community service conducted outside of school hours for a community organization. We enrolled 15-20 girls in the program which focused on healthy eating and physical activity with an emphasis on leadership development (modeled on Generation Fit). The community service requirements for the 2007-08 pilot year participants were:

Attend six “club” meetings after school (45 min. – 1 hour). Objectives are for girls to:

- Give HT staff information by filling out an assessment survey
- Learn the “basics” of how to eat well and stay fit from a Registered Dietician
- Help the HT team by giving feedback about the HT program activities (what works and what doesn’t), feedback about the school and girls ideas for program and policy changes that would create a more HEPA friendly environment
- Plan activities starting in January 2008 to get more people involved (including a kick off event in March)

Team Up for Good Health/Fitness program at the Y

Girls join the Y and agree to work out for a total of 6 – 10 hours.

Girls pick a partner from the school and agree on a plan to be physically active. Specific objectives are:

- Fill out an Action Gameplan
- Complete a Partners Agreement
- Turn in Partner Daily Log
- Complete a self-evaluation “Did we Make a Difference”

Leadership: Communication and Advocacy

Write up your project (for college/job application)

Make a presentation (with partner) to the HT Advisory Committee Meeting, at the Y or another school group

Four girls completed their 20 hours in 2007-08.

This program demonstrated great potential for both recruiting girls to HT and giving them training in leadership combined with healthy eating/physical activity. In 2008-09, HT will be added to the official list of approved organizations for

community service; the guidance department is well-informed and enthusiastic about HT. We need to give this program a clearer definition, however, in the coming year—girls were somewhat unclear as to specific activities we were requiring—a combination of workouts at the Y, information feedback to plan and evaluate HT and leadership activities (such as serving on the Advisory Board.) We are hoping to identify more Wesleyan mentors (through the fall Wesleyan community service course—Health of Communities) who will mentor a small number of girls in more defined activities.

- **Wesleyan Peer Mentors**

HT is fortunate to be able to build on the extensive, existing campus community partnership between Wesleyan University in Middletown CT (approximately 15 minutes from NBHS) and the Community Health Center. Through the work study program, we obtained the services of an outstanding student, Christa Vardaro, who has become a full member of the HT team. She co-facilitates after school groups, exercises with the girls at the Y on Saturdays, leads special field trips to Wesleyan and other events (such as a very successful “open mic” event at NBHS in March 2008 attended by over 30 students) and set up a gmail account to communicate regularly with the girls. Her enthusiasm and commitment make her a great role model for the girls.

In 2008-08, we hope to recruit additional mentors through the Health of Communities class at Wesleyan (2 students will be assigned to HT for their service project connected to the class) as well as the work study program.

Group Activities and Special Events Promoting HEPA

- **Fitness Program at YWCA of New Britain**

This partnership is a great asset of the program. It supports the goals of HT and of the Y—which sees recruitment of girls in their teen years as a great priority, since there is a dramatic falling off in membership among older adolescents.

Through HT, girls receive free membership in the Y; the Y, in turn, waives all facility and program fees. The Y also provides facility space for HT activities and in 2008 designated a Y exercise specialist, Erin Casey, as the liaison to Healthy Tomorrows. She works extensively with the girls and reports the 11-12 are now regularly coming to the Y to exercise. A total of 50-60 have filled out memberships through HT and exercise more sporadically.

A goal for the next years will be to 1) work with the core group of regular exercisers (who may or may not be the same group that we have identified as Ambassadors) to give them more intensive education in HEPA and leadership training; and 2) to encourage the less frequent exercisers to become more active. The Y Executive Director has suggested that qualified girls and/or Wesleyan mentors be trained as fitness coaches to mentor peers/younger children.

- **After school club:** The group met on Wednesdays after school from 2:30 to approximately 3:15 (when the late school bus arrived). This was a good way to recruit new girls and inform them about the program, but it had drawbacks in terms of delivering program content (see Challenges). We will be revamping our approach to the “club” in 2008-09.

Other accomplishments:

Under a CATCH grant, we have been able to strengthen outreach contacts and partnerships in the community, specifically with the Spanish Speaking Center (serving 3,000 predominately Latino low-income families annually). Two focus groups were held in July and August 2008, each with 10 parents participating. They were facilitated by our U-Conn partner. Focus group results will be extremely helpful for planning HT strategies in the years ahead. (See #5 Plans for the Future for more information).

c) Principal Challenges

There are four significant barriers that challenge us but we have made significant progress in addressing them as of Year 2. We look forward to the input of the TA team in these areas:

- **Parent engagement and recruitment of parents** as Advisory Committee members: Through our partnership with the Spanish Speaking Center, as a result of the CATCH grant (see Above), we can report good progress in this area, although barriers remain. As of September, a parent, Maria Borrero, has accepted an invitation to serve as a member of our Advisory Committee and will participate in the 9/25/08 TA site visit. Maria is the parent of four children, ages 10 to adult. She has a son who is a 12th grader at NBHS.

At our Advisory Committee meeting (09/08/08), Maria made it clear that she thought HT was a great resource but not widely enough “marketed” throughout the school and community, especially to non-English speaking communities. (She did not know about it until we held the focus groups at the SSC). She wants us to expand the program to include boys and younger children (her daughter is age 10 and Maria sees a big problem of obesity starting at an early age.) To some extent these are objectives that would be beyond the capacity of the grant, but we want to respond positively recognizing that these are urgent needs. We brainstormed at the meeting about how we could include younger children (through the community service projects, for example, having older teens mentor younger kids, lead Y activities, etc.)

Strategies that have not worked in recruiting parents are flyers distributed at the at the School-based health center (SBHC) and mailed invitations to parents of girls participating in HT activities. In 2008-09, we plan to speak at the PTO and Open House in the fall—possibly with HT members or with Maria (who is active in the PTO) as our liaisons to parents.

- **Difficulty maintaining consistent engagement of girls:** As noted above, we have succeeded in recruiting a larger number of girls than we project in our original proposal (N = 61). All of them are excited by the program, love the activities and have participated in many of them. However, when we plan a particular activity (e.g., yoga class, lunch with staff of the health center), we find the participation rates fall off—despite the fact that the girls themselves have chosen the activity.

Some of the barriers are external to HT, and are related to the “turmoil” within NBHS which is under pressure to improve students performance, reduce the high drop out rate, improve teacher morale, performance, retention etc. For example, in 2007-08, we started a Wednesday after school club girls, but had to cancel meetings repeatedly at the last minute because the school scheduled “half days” for teacher in-service.

Another challenge is that the majority of girls have multiple demands on their time, due to family obligations (helping out with child care or a family businesses) and jobs. The survey conducted by U-Conn for example found that many girls frequently go to the hospital emergency rooms, not for themselves, but to assist or translate for other family members.

The need to identify and connect with a core group of girls is the primary challenge we face at this stage. We have made progress in this area through the summer Ambassadors program (described above), an effort to identify a core group of girls most engaged with the program and nurturing them as leaders in the school and community. We have had mixed success with this program to date, but plan to continue and refine it in Years 3-5. We have identified a need for some kind of leadership training for our Ambassadors. There are opportunities for some formal training both through the YWCA and the high school—we will explore these opportunities and would welcome input from the TA team.

- **Finding a meeting space for counseling and after school club** has been very challenging. Paula Leibovitz, our RD, established contact with the school RN and is able to use her office for 1-1 counseling. Our club meetings are held in the media center/library from 2:30 to 3:15—bells, PA announcements are constant interruptions and girls come and go as they need to catch the school bus. We are considering moving after school meetings off site in 2008-09, either to the Y and/or the SSC and holding special events only at the school.
- **Technology barriers.** Access to Internet and wireless are not available within the high school, an external barrier beyond our control. This barrier has limited our ability to use the internet to teach girls about healthy eating and physical activity. Our Wesleyan mentor created a gmail account that is being used as a means of electronic communication with girls. However, we have found that girls do not often check their email.

2) Original Goals and Objectives:

a) Original Goals and Objectives of Program

Objective 1: By April 2007, establish a multidisciplinary project Planning Committee as a subgroup of the existing SBHC Advisory Committee including at least 3-4 adolescents as well as diverse representation from pediatricians, educators, health care providers, exercise and diet specialists

Objective 2: Begin one-on-one nutritional counseling, education and self-management goal-setting sessions with the FSF registered dietitian for girls enrolled in SBHC who are overweight or obese (BMI 25+)

Objective 3: May 2007, conduct a kickoff Food Smart and Fit forum with young women from New Britain High School to elicit their opinions/attitudes about the “obesity epidemic,” barriers, opportunities for healthy activities/eating, cultural issues, and strategies for building awareness of FSF and recruiting peers to participate in it.

Objective 4: From May to September 2007, develop a Leadership Training program focused on physical activity and eating and train a pilot group of youth leaders from the high school to play leadership roles during the school year as peer mentors and advocates for policy change to promote opportunities for healthy eating/activity.

Objective 5: During the school year 2007-2008, recruit 15-20 young women obese/overweight or at risk and enroll them in a six session Goal Setting Self Management workshop, with two follow-up maintenance sessions and mentoring support from youth leaders for maintaining healthy behaviors.

Objective 6: Over the five-year period, hold at least one annual school-wide “Healthy Block Party”, planned by youth leaders, offering a variety of healthy eating and physical activities.

Objective 7: In Year 5 (2011-2012), analyze and disseminate FSF evaluation findings to a variety of audiences, through presentations published papers, etc.,

b. Discuss any changes to the objectives

In general, we have adhered to the original objectives in that the program maintains a three-pronged approach (nutritional counseling, small group activities and leadership training) to achieve its goals of promoting healthy eating and physical activity and empowering young women to become leaders in advocating for healthier school and communities.

The major shift in emphasis has been to substitute a more-wide ranging “portfolio” of group activities, exercise programs and special events rather than the original plan of holding a six-session Goal Setting Self Management workshop (Objective 5). That format had been developed and successfully implemented with older women (16-24) in a clinic setting under a grant from the Office on Women’s Health. Given the “realities” of the age demographic and the school setting, we realized that the workshop format would not be appropriate or feasible. The drawback of the “portfolio” approach is that it is difficult to maintain consistency or evaluate with a “pre-post” methodology. The strength of this approach is that it gives the young women a leadership role in defining the activities that they want and allows the HT staff to develop an ongoing relationship with a core group of girls.

For specific changes in objectives, please refer to the enclosed continuation application. The year 2 objectives reflect the modifications and adaptations to the original objectives.

c. Discuss how objectives are measured.

For group and leadership activities, we measure progress toward objectives through attendance records (maintained by HT and the Y) and through collection of qualitative data through focus groups.

See Evaluation for more detailed discussion.

3) Evaluation:

We have had both successes and ongoing challenges in this area. We are collecting basic utilization data—e.g., attendance at meetings, sign in sheets at the Y. We have a list of participants with phone number, email addresses, etc. that we use to contact girls and parents. In Fall 2007, we designed an enrollment form with HEPA questions that would allow us to establish a baseline for measuring outcomes but because of the challenges outlined above only about 15 girls completed these assessment forms. Because of the many cancellations, erratic attendance, we stopped trying to have the girls complete the forms at the after school meetings.

Our evaluator, Dr. Stephanie Milan, U-Conn, summarizes our successes/challenges as follows: Successful HT evaluation efforts include: good info from CATCH focus groups at the SSC and the 9th grade health class survey of about 600 students. Challenges are limited repeated attendance and open, flexible attendance so doing pre-post evaluation is difficult. “Given the nature of intervention efforts, most of the evaluation is going to be more at the level of benchmarks (maybe some pre-post from nutritional counseling) but there is no effective way to do anything in a traditional pre-post design.” Input in this area is welcome.

4. Tools and Resources Developed (or being developed) by the Project

HT has identified and adapted materials from evidence-based models for healthy eating/physical activity and leadership/youth development. These include:

- the American Cancer Society's [Generation Fit](#), a “set of enrichment activities that give young people ages 11 to 18 the opportunity to act on issues related to nutrition and physical activity in their schools and community.”

Generation Fit features five enrichment activities/community service projects:

- Food for Thought: Trying New Recipes in your Cafeteria;
- Message Magic: Selling Healthy Eating and Physical Activity;
- Lend a Helping Hand: Planning Meals for Those in Need;
- “Team up for Good Health: Improving Habits with a Partner; and
- “let’s Get Moving: Making Physical Activity a Priority in Our Community.”

HT used forms and materials from #4 : Team Up for Good Health, because it is closely aligned with our efforts to expand our partnership with the YWCA of New Britain. HT staff developed a job description that integrates the Generation Fit activities with HT goals and objectives.

- Women’s Sports Foundation’s Go Girl Go! Program. We adapted materials from the Go Girl Go! Ambassadors program for our Ambassadors program. They have a diary/scrapbook and “guide to life” that we have distributed to girls but because of logistics of after school meetings, we have not been able to use these materials thoroughly. We are hoping to address that issue in 2008-09.
- WeCan program

We have developed our own materials—flyers designed by girls to market the program in the school.

5) Plans for the Future

a) Lessons Learned

- Make Advisory Board members and teen participants your program advocates
- Have a portfolio of activities for teens, one approach doesn’t work
- Don’t be discouraged by temporary setbacks—persistence, patience and long term trust building are key
- Stay connected to participants (by phone, email, mail)—with teens, none of the above may work! Learn text messaging even if you’re “over the hill” technologically speaking.
- With multi-faceted programs like HT, short-term outcomes may be elusive or difficult to measure but your intervention is likely to be setting the stage for longer-term changes in the environment and community norms
- Cultivate campus-community partnership that involve college students as mentors to younger adolescents and children over the long term
- Look for partners outside health care—e.g., museums, local symphony, etc.

b) Matching funding sources that have been identified/secured

The YWCA has been a significant in-kind resource (waiving of fees, use of facility and allocation of staff time)

Wesleyan has been a source of in-kind support through its work study program

U-Conn has contributed faculty time for evaluation

GoGirlGo application (submitted July 2008) is under review

CATCH grant (awarded in December 2008). The planning grant, which focuses on engaging parents and community partners in health promotion efforts, including obesity prevention, has helped HT broaden its outreach to parents and community organizations (Spanish Speaking Center).

Specific grant applications planned for Year 2 include several local sources: the Community Foundation of Greater New Britain, American Savings Foundation, Stanley Works.

c) New partnerships

Spanish Speaking Center: the CATCH focus groups expanded our contacts with NBHS Latino parents (Maria Borrero recruited through these groups). Discussion are under way with Mary Sanders, Executive Director of SSC, to continue this partnership in 2008-09, by informing teens who use the center about HT and engaging more parents. Possibilities include holding group activities at SSC.

d) Significant changes;

No significant changes are planned; modifications and strategies to address challenge and strengthen the program are discussed above.

6. Assistance from the TA Team

Please see Challenges for areas of concern and specific areas where input from the TA team would be helpful.

Overall, we see the following needs:

- Evaluation
- Leadership development models
- Recruitment strategies—getting the word out to more students and community members
- Cultivating relationships with the media

