

LEADER TIMES

Pittsburgh embraces We Can! after Armstrong's success

By Renatta Signorini

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A fitness and health model created in Armstrong County is catching on.

Pittsburgh announced its status Thursday as a We Can! city, two months after Armstrong became the nation's first We Can! county. We Can! is a program formed by the National Institutes of Health that can be implemented in a variety of ways to combat growing waistlines in youth.

The We Can! program combined with HEALTHY Armstrong -- a health and wellness initiative started in the county -- has sparked the interest of the neighboring city.

"I didn't think that it was going to happen that quickly," said Patty Shiring, executive director of the ACMH Hospital Foundation.

HEALTHY Armstrong -- Healthy Eating and Active Lifestyles, Together Helping Youth -- and We Can! -- Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition! -- have similar goals -- to reduce childhood obesity by educating children and families about healthy lifestyles. Armstrong County uses in-school, after-school and community programs.

Armstrong School District, ACMH Hospital and its foundation, UPMC Health Plan and Children's Community Pediatrics Armstrong are partners in the county's programs.

The county initiative's growth can be attributed to UPMC Health Plan, Shiring said, which helped make the connection between Armstrong and Pittsburgh.

Michael Culyba, vice president of medical affairs for UPMC Health Plan, said he hopes to see Pittsburgh's program have the same results as Armstrong's.

"They've developed a model that can be easily adapted" because of the community's collaboration, he said.

Dr. Kiran Bhat, an Armstrong County pediatrician, spoke at yesterday's ceremony in Pittsburgh. He has shared information about Armstrong's initiative at various conferences around the country.

Bhat created a pilot program at Elderton Elementary after a weight problem was uncovered in the county's young students three years ago. Since then, We Can! and HEALTHY Armstrong officially kicked off in September in Armstrong School District

elementaries. The schools have incorporated fitness activities and wellness education for students, Shiring said.

At West Hills Primary, an after-school fitness club meets once a week to try healthy snacks, learn about fitness and participate in a fun activity, Shiring said. Students have a morning stretch and warm up and a structured recess is in the works, she said.

Similar activities are going on in Kittanning Township Elementary where students learn about Tae Bo and dance, she said.

"Most, if not all, of the teachers are doing this on their own time," Shiring said.

Armstrong County's programs are focused mainly in the elementary schools, she said, because research has shown that preventing a student's progression toward obesity is more successful than intervention.

Renatta Signorini can be reached at rsignorini@tribweb.com or 724-543-1303, ext. 219.