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Official: Kids' environment, obesity linked

By Jane Clifford
FAMILY EDITOR

September 22, 2007

Childhood obesity is not a problem San Diego families can fight on their own.

"We need to improve the environments where children spend most of their day," Jack O'Connell, California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, said this week in a video address to hundreds gathered at the Town and Country Resort and Convention Center in Mission Valley.

To that end, representatives from the business sector, schools, child-care centers, health care, government and churches turned out for the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Summit. More than 650 people filled the meeting room to hear about what's working to prevent what is considered an epidemic of overweight and obese children.

In California, O'Connell noted, "three out of four children are unfit and one in four are overweight." In San Diego County, according to the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, one in four children is overweight, too.

The summit was organized to showcase efforts to change those numbers, at least in San Diego. Speakers addressed seven key areas of the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative, a public/private sector partnership that sponsored the summit.

Jeff Rossman, co-founder of Terra, a local restaurant, spoke of his collaboration with Central Elementary in San Diego, while Mark Mendoza, the chef for San Diego city schools whipped up some nutritious food on stage. Rossman established a garden on the campus to show students that the food they eat comes out of the ground, not a can or a plastic wrapper, and to teach them a little about cooking nutritious food in an appetizing way.

Paul Zykofsky, director of land-use and transportation programs at the Local Government Commission, a nonprofit group in Sacramento dedicated to creating more livable communities, pointed to Little Italy and Hillcrest's Uptown District as examples of building around people, not the automobile. They are among a slowly growing number of neighborhoods that promote walking and biking to shops and parks and more.

Kaiser Permanente and Rady Children's Hospital San Diego executives explained efforts to get doctors more involved in identifying children who are at risk of obesity so they and their families can be redirected

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before the onset of the high blood pressure, diabetes and sleep apnea and other obesity-related illnesses already plaguing even preschoolers.

Child-care providers and schools highlighted how they are incorporating nutrition and fitness into their programs. And Glovioell Rowland, assistant pastor and pastor of health at Pasadena Church of God, explained Body and Soul, a wellness program for African-American communities that is working its way into churches.

All these efforts have grown out of the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Action Plan, released last year, Cheryl Moder explained during a break at the summit.

“The goal is to change our social and physical environment to make healthy choices easier and more natural for families,” said Moder, director of the county's Obesity Initiative.

Telling families to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables and be more active is somewhat unrealistic, she said, when they live in neighborhoods where grocery shopping is done in small stores with limited inventory, where safety concerns keep children from biking, where schools are so far away that walking is out of the question.

“At the end of the day, it's about families making healthy choices for their children, but it's more difficult for them to make those choices if our environment doesn't support them.”

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