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Page: 4B

Grant will spread youth healthy lifestyle program

\$35,000 will help expand fitness activities for Rockford children in target areas.

Mike DeDoncker Rockford Register Star

ROCKFORD -- Some Rockford children considered most at risk for obesity-related health problems will get healthy lifestyle and nutrition help this fall because of a \$35,000 grant to the Employers Coalition on Health.

The grant from the National Business Coalition on Health will support expanding a Youth Fit For Life curriculum, now followed in YMCA of Rock River Valley activities, Rockford Park District summer programs and the YMCA's Camp Winnebago, into kids' programming at the Blackhawk Boys & Girls Club, 330 15th Ave.

Targets for the program will be 50 to 70 children recruited from families using the Winnebago County Health Department's Blackhawk Park School Linked Health Center, which serves students from Beyer, Kishwaukee, Lathrop, Nelson, Haskell, Washington Gifted Program and King elementary schools.

The curriculum, in a study of local children ages 5 through 12 from 2007 through 2009, showed significant progress "in the areas of increasing physical activity, changing behaviors and reducing body mass index," according to a report by study leader Jim Annesi, Ph.D., director of wellness advancement at the Metro Atlanta YMCA.

Beyer students at risk

Jan Jann, vice president of marketing and public relations for the YMCA of Rock River Valley who helped write the grant application for the three-year study, said the Blackhawk Park area was chosen for the project because it qualified as "an underserved, underresourced neighborhood which has been proven to have high potential for health issues based on obesity." A February 2009 report showed that 24 percent of Beyer students ages 5 through 12 were obese, compared with national averages of 12.9 percent and a state average of 13 percent.

Salary, materials covered

The grant will pay salary for Gayle Dixon, program director for the YMCA's Community Outreach Branch, and for a coordinator at the Blackhawk Boys & Girls Club as Dixon teaches the Youth Fit For Life curriculum to the Blackhawk Park staff. It will also cover project materials and clinical services by the Winnebago County Health Department to take pre- and post-project health measurements and provide health care for the 50 to 70 children expected to take part during the project.

Just over another \$35,000 worth of in-kind donation of equipment use by the Boys & Girls Club and donated time by Dr. Gene Boyd, ECOH's medical director, to serve as medical director for the project and by Health Department staff to conduct evaluation and write a final report brings the total project cost to \$70,750.

"The training is to teach the people that are already working with the kids different things to do," Dixon said. "Instead of being 'OK, we're going to come and exercise,' all of the

games and things that they learn will be getting the kids up and moving.

"There are a lot of tag games, but what typically happens in a setting like this is a child is tagged and then sits out so they're not moving and being active. Instead, in most of the games and activities that we play, the kids are continuously moving so they're having fun while they're doing it and not realizing that they're getting so much out of it."

Mid-September start

The project timeline calls for training of the Boys & Girls Club staff and student recruitment along with seeking parental permission to begin in mid-September. Initial health testing of the students is planned to begin in early October.

The Youth Fit For Life programming is scheduled to start Nov. 1, and the post-project health testing is set for April 2011. The project's final report is to be sent to the national coalition in July 2011.

Jann said the grant was made possible by ECOH's participation in Rockford's YMCA-led Pioneering Healthy Communities and Get Moving projects.

"When we saw that the National Business Coalition on Health had partnered with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and others for community health initiatives in cooperation with local health departments -- (Winnebago County Health Department Administrator) Mike Bacon sits next to me at Get Moving," ECOH Executive Director Paul Brand said. "It was only natural that he and I would get our heads together and go to (YMCA of Rock River Valley President and CEO) Wray Howard and say let's go after this money.

"The focus on obesity levels in schools, we all understand why that's important. It was an opportunity that arrived at the right time for this community."