Walk with Friends: A Comprehensive Approach to Address Violence and the Social Determinants of Health

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**BACKGROUND**
- Valley Hi is a low to middle-income community in South Sacramento with a highly racially and ethnically diverse population, low educational attainment, limited English proficiency, and low home ownership.
- Roughly 36% of adult residents in Valley Hi are obese.
- In addition, Emergency Department visits in 2016 for diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and asthma-related illnesses in Valley Hi all exceeded county rates by more than 50%.
- Fast food outlets and businesses selling unhealthy products saturate the main corridor of Valley Hi.
- Valley Hi has had a long-standing history of high crime and gang violence. From 2008-2010, Sacramento was identified as having the 2nd highest crime rate per capita in California, due in part to the violence occurring on Valley Hi’s main corridor, Mack Road.
- High crime, violence, and fear of violence served as substantial barriers to resident engagement, utilization of local parks, and neighborhood cohesion. Violence and the stress caused by fear of violence can greatly contribute to health disparities and negatively impact health outcomes.

**OBJECTIVES**
- Employ a public health approach to address violence, in part by establishing a community walking group aimed to:
  - Increase safety in the community, starting with safe parks
  - Increase physical activity and healthy eating
  - Increase access to fruits and vegetables
  - Develop greater cohesion between neighbors

**METHODS**
- Valley Hi Park was identified as a community asset and an access point for physical activity opportunities for Valley Hi residents.
- A walk audit of Valley Hi Park was conducted, during which gun shots were fired at the park by a group of young males, illustrating a clear example of violence as a barrier to health.
- This sparked an in-depth discussion about violence and safety concerns between cross-sector partners in the Valley Hi community.

**METHODS, CONTINUED**
- Community partners including law enforcement, local churches and community based organizations formed a sub-committee of the Health Education Council’s Kaiser Permanente-funded Healthy Eating Active Living (HEAL) Zone, leading to park clean-ups, a summer basketball league and additional park centralized activities.
- Infrastructure changes for the park and surrounding areas were identified, bringing about the installation of a pedestrian crosswalk at a dangerous intersection leading to Valley Hi Park and installation of fitness equipment throughout the park.
- A small walking group was identified as Valley Hi’s “Walk with Friends”. Resident ownership of the walking group, and in turn Valley Hi Park, was fostered by engaging a community leader to spearhead the program.
- Partnership with a nearby church and the Sacramento Food Bank was developed to provide produce for walk participants each week.
- Walk with Friends was connected to local service providers & resources, including doctors, health screenings, healthcare insurance, etc.

**RESULTS**
- Since first engaging residents with programming at Valley Hi Park, park usage has increased by 27.4% (as indicated by park permit requests).
- Heat map representing firearms assaults in Valley Hi has decreased from red to orange/yellow in 2016.
- Participants report that Walk with Friends has provided the opportunity to build relationships with neighbors, share resources & increase resident engagement.
- Walk with Friends participants have become civically engaged, participating in advocacy efforts to create systems changes to better support healthy eating and active living.
- Walk with Friends has expanded to 3 other parks within Sacramento and Placer Counties and has adapted to a schools model, like the Walk with Friends at Robla Community Park.

**CONCLUSION**
Walk with Friends is a model for walking groups that functions beyond a physical activity and nutrition education program. Walk with Friends serves as a catalyst to address the core needs of the community and as an access point to integrate additional resources for residents. It utilizes a comprehensive strategy to address the social determinants of health, especially community safety, but also access to resources and fruits and vegetables, neighborhood cohesion, and economic stability, all of which contribute to individuals’ health outcomes and overall community vitality.

REFERENCE: