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Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

Using Your Parks and Recreation Department to Combat Youth Obesity
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Moderator: **Leon T. Andrews**, Program Director for Youth Development
Institute for Youth, Education, and Families
National League of Cities (NLC)

Speakers:

Jane Adams, executive director, California Parks and Recreation Society
Susan O'Connor, recreation director, Parks and Recreation Department, South Bend, Ind.
Kathy Spangler, director of national partnerships, National Recreation and Park Association
Paul Widman, assistant director, Cultural and Wellness Division, Metro Board of Parks and Recreation, Nashville, Tenn.

ANDREWS: Good afternoon to all of you. We have a great audience and panel today in this latest of our monthly audioconference series from the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families. My name is Leon Andrews. I am the Program Director for Youth Development here in the Institute. I'm glad that you could join us this afternoon. Today's audioconference is part of a long-running series of monthly audioconferences sponsored by the Institute. This call was made possible through the generous support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which awarded a grant to the Institute to enable us to explore ways in which municipal leaders can take action to prevent and reduce childhood obesity. And we want to thank the Robert Wood Johnson for its support.

For those who are not familiar with the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, we are a special Institute within the National League of Cities. Our function is to expand the capacity of city leaders to take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. If you would like to learn more about the Institute, you can visit our website. The exact address is www.nlc.org/iyef. The website will provide a lot of information. You can use the website to register for regular updates from the Institute if that is of interest to you. The website also provides a number of resources on youth obesity, which is the focus of our call today.

With youth obesity on the rise nationally, many local governments are searching for ways to tackle one of the country's most important public health issues. In March 2005, we hosted an audioconference that discussed municipal strategies to prevent childhood obesity. We were joined by a distinguished panel -- Connie Busse, who is the executive director of the Cities Counties and Schools Partnership [www.ccspartnership.org]; Charles Royer, director of the Urban Health Initiative [www.urbanhealth.org]; and Carol Schechter, vice president and director

of the Center for Health Communication at the Academy for Educational Development [www.aed.org]. If you're interested in reading a copy of the transcript, you can download a copy from our website. Also, if you're interested in receiving a cassette recording of the March 2005 call, we have a number of tapes available, and you can contact Michael Karpman at karpman@nlc.org for information.

The conference in March 2005 highlighted a report by the Institute of Medicine [www.iom.edu]. The report was "Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance." And essentially the report and the frame of the discussion during the call was to understand when cities begin addressing the issue of childhood obesity, taking the appropriate action requires attention to what influences nutrition and physical activity levels because obesity prevention involves a focus on this energy balance, which is calories consumed vs. calories expended. In today's audioconference, city leaders from around the nation will hear about innovative practices for addressing childhood obesity, specifically how they can use the resources offered through Parks and Recreation Departments.

So without further ado, let me introduce our four distinguished panelists for today's call. First is Kathy Spangler. Kathy is the National Partners Director for the National Recreation and Park Association in Ashburn, Virginia [www.nrpa.org]. She has been with NRPA since 1987 and has been responsible for the development of numerous national partnerships focused on healthy lifestyles, youth development, environment stewardship and quality sports. She is a past president of the National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity [www.ncppa.org] and an advisory board member for both the National Parks Service Health Committee [www.nps.gov] and the American Council for Fitness and Nutrition [www.acfn.org]. Welcome, Kathy.

SPANGLER: Thank you.

ANDREWS: Secondly, we have Jane Adams. Jane is the Executive Director of the California Park and Recreation Society in Sacramento, California [www.cprs.org], one of the largest park and recreational professional organizations in the country, CPRS provides the leadership and resources for park and recreation agencies and professionals to create community through people, parks and programs. Welcome, Jane.

ADAMS: Thank you, all.

ANDREWS: Our third panelist is Paul Widman. Paul is the Assistant Director of Metroparks in Nashville, Tennessee [www.nashville.gov/parks]. Paul has worked in the parks and recreation field for 16 years and a majority of Paul's focus has been on youth health and sedentary lifestyle issues. He oversees the Recreation Division of Metroparks, which includes 22 community centers, senior centers, and recreation programs. Hi, Paul.

WIDMAN: Hello.

ANDREWS: Finally, we have Susan O'Connor. Susan has been the Recreation Director with the South Bend Parks and Recreation Department [www.sbpark.org] for the last 16 years. She has been in the field of parks and recreation for 28 years, and we're glad to have you as well, Susan.

O'CONNOR: Thank you.

ANDREWS: Great, so why don't we get started? And I'd like to ask Kathy if you can start us off. From your perspective, why is the childhood obesity issue so important?

SPANGLER: Childhood obesity is an issue that's important to every American because it is our future. The notion of having healthy children and having a healthy society goes hand in hand. Today nearly a third of children are overweight or are on the verge of becoming overweight, and the best predictor of physical activity for young people is simply getting outdoors. The notion of giving access and opportunity for young people to pursue healthy lifestyles starts at a very young age and it is very important relative to the issue of obesity and making sure that young people can be healthy adults and productive citizens in our society.

ANDREWS: Jane, do you have a response to that as well?

ADAMS: I read somewhere quite recently that this generation of Americans is potentially the first generation that is not going to live as long because of the health consequences of obesity and being overweight. And so it really is an issue that we can no longer afford quite frankly to not talk about. I think it's time that we sit down and as we're going to do hopefully today, talk about those best practices and promising practices, I think, right now. There is a lot of conflicting research out there about this, and conflicting messages. Is this a personal responsibility issue? Or is this a governmental issue? And so I think there's a lot of controversy about this whole issue. But I believe that parks and recreation departments quite frankly are just so well positioned to be the leaders in their community in this effort to fight obesity.

ANDREWS: And Paul, I'd like for you to chime and talk a little bit about the factors from your perspective that you think motivate cities to make childhood obesity a priority. So Paul, why don't you go first?

WIDMAN: Well, I think it was just mentioned that the resources we represent, we're positioned to provide leadership and the factors that would make this a priority. We're seeing the results of physical education programs being reduced or eliminated. There is an economic problem that we need to address, and that is the healthcare costs go up as we address this issue. And to look at this as a preventive -- you know, we can prevent new healthcare costs, we can prevent so many problems with the resources we have and provide to the community.

O'CONNOR: I would have to agree with Paul. I think in South Bend, we have seen that at least 30% of the youth who sign up for our programs are obese, overweight, and it's a real concern as to where we're going within our society. And children have so many problems to face these days, and weight is one thing that we can control and we can be a part of the solution. And I think through our involvement, through our national association, we have just found it very important to focus in on that.

ADAMS: Also there has been a couple of surveys that have been recently done by NACO, the National Association of Counties [www.naco.org], and I believe with ICMA (International

City/County Management Association – www.icma.org) that shows that the local leaders recognize that Parks and Recreation has the potential to be a leader in this whole issue of obesity and inactivity. So I think the time is really quite ripe. And what it's going to take is continuing certainly the efforts of NRPA and many of the partnerships that they've created at the national level, bringing a lot of at-cost and no-cost programs to park and recreation agencies around the city. It's very critical.

But I'm also going to challenge everybody for just a moment and say, hey, parks and recreation professionals, it's time that you step up! You need to take a leadership role in this. And there are literally hundreds of examples of what is working very well.

Let me cite one of them. For example, the City of San Leandro, which is in the Alameda/Oakland area [www.ci.san-leandro.ca.us/slparks.html]. Carolyn Knudtson, the director there, started last year just with her own staff. And she created a walking program for the city employees to incorporate healthy foods and water into the day care programs. She sent a letter home to all of the kids' parents asking the parents to not have their kids bring a soda to day care. You know, they're looking for 100% juice and they're going to be serving the kids water. So even these small incremental steps can make a huge, huge difference.

SPANGLER: I agree with you. When we conducted our field study -- a nationwide field study of Hearts and Parks in partnership with the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute [www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/prof/heart/obesity/hrt_n_pk/index.htm], we were in 56 communities across 10 states with high rates of cardiovascular disease. The park and recreation agencies focused on both youth and older adults. But what was quite interesting the very first year -- this was a three-year effort -- in the first year, many of the departments focused internally on their own culture, because this is an issue that does challenge each and every one of us. And if we don't embrace it on our own lives as role models, then it's very difficult to implement in practices and policies and procedures. And so effectively, many of the Hearts and Parks magnet centers used that first year to build a culture within their system to support serving the public more readily around health promotion activities.

ADAMS: And I think that notion here might be a best practice for everyone to consider, that when you begin your efforts in this area, you do have to provide your staff with training. And there are any number of nutrition experts, and I'm sure many of us live near community colleges and universities that have nutrition or public health programs. And these professionals would be very delighted to come and train your staff, because it's very important -- as Kathy said, we've got to walk the walk.

O'CONNOR: I have to agree with you, Jane. We were a Hearts and Parks site, and we within our community have a lot of partners that stepped up to the plate and were part of a lot of our programs to come out, train our staff to be part of our programs because they are committed to focusing on this issue and really trying to help our communities as a whole become healthier.

ANDREWS: For those that are on the call that may not be as familiar with the Hearts and Parks sites, can one of you talk a little bit about what it took to become a site and the responsibilities around being a site, what expectations, and so forth?

SPANGLER: Well, Susan, I'll start and you can chime in. We literally partnered with the

National Heart Lung and Blood Institute at the National Institutes of Health, and they called us up and said, “We have a great idea to do Hearts and Parks. What is it?” And over a pilot project in North Carolina, where we had 12 communities doing pre- and post-testing on their summer programs around nutrition and physical activity, we framed the parameters of what Hearts and Parks would be. And it literally started with early adopters.

We targeted the ten states across the country with the highest rates of cardiovascular disease in both youth and adults, and we put a call out to communities that wanted to step up, to not just improve their programming, but to look at the full spectrum of how to mobilize a community for change. And so it was people and partnerships and programs and public visibility and policies and practices and places and spaces. I have assets that we have in parks and recreation, and the final nugget to that was performance measurements. All too often, parks and recreation services get viewed or are perceived as not having a tangible outcome or value.

And our goal over three years of working with these 56 communities was to document and demonstrate to a performance measurement that NIH facilitated, that the impact of a park and recreation program and service where there is an intention to improve health outcome was significant. And it was fascinating to see in those 56 communities, they really did not know at the outset what they were getting into, but came to realize over time that in fact they could have an impact on the health and wellbeing of the people that they served through their resources.

And it took time. We asked them to measure and document one program for both youth and adults in the first year, two programs in the second year, three programs in the third year because that performance measurement piece, when you’re at that point of leisure and recreation, it’s often difficult to measure. And so we literally were working with those 56 communities to understand how to evolve the culture of park and recreation delivery systems to be more intentional first, and then to deliver on some outcomes that can be programmed and planned for in the process of service. And so we looked for early adopters, and they raised their hands and they hung in there for three years. And I’ll let Susan follow up with the impact it’s had on the community and on the image of parks and recreation for having done the heavy lifting.

But to a person, those communities have gone further faster because they were intentional about those outcomes. It was the first, and I think the only, national grassroots field study of its kind that really focused on documentation and demonstration of outcomes to the good work that we do.

O’CONNOR: And I think that what was really important for us were the life changes that we made within our staff, within the participants in our programs. We really focused on small challenges. We didn’t want people to go into this thinking that they had to make these major changes that they wouldn’t stick with. And I think the important thing with that is we came back to the very simple educational component of showing them visuals, reintroducing them to gains in nutrition and exercise programs that have always been out there, but just aren’t being done because we are such a strained society that the kids are in front of the screens so much of their day, and they are not out exercising and they don’t really understand the input of the calories vs. burning the calories -- what it takes to burn the calories. And so we are really focused on that, and it has been an ideal situation for us, and it has really marked us within this community.

ADAMS: I'm just wondering if -- I know when Paul was introduced, I believe he has like 22 community centers in Nashville. Is that right, Paul?

WIDMAN: Right, yes.

ADAMS: But do you do any work with schools? And maybe, Susan, you do, too. I know in many communities, they just don't have the recreational facilities. And so there is just a real need to partner with schools. So I'm wondering if either of you have been successful in that arena.

WIDMAN: Well, I can just speak to that a little bit. We have a partnership that's growing, and it's through a coalition called "Alignment Nashville" [www.alignmentnashville.org]. And that is an initiative -- what it is, there are 65 community partners that have aligned with Nashville schools, and it addresses issues facing the youth and teen population. The focus of this past year has been health-related issues. And we have had -- and when I say we, our department, Parks and Recreation, has played a key role in guiding the goals and strategies regarding the physical activity component of this Alignment Nashville -- their 2006 effort.

Now from that, we are formalizing some partnerships. And we already do a lot of things with the schools, obviously, having 22 community centers throughout Nashville. Most of them are situated next to elementary or junior high schools. So most of that partnership has been to make sure there are services available in the afterschool hours.

ANDREWS: There is a question that came from our listening audience that was relevant to the Hearts and Parks. Do any of you have the website of the Hearts and Parks? Does it have a website?

SPANGLER: You can find it easiest through the NRPA website, www.nrpa.org. It's located on the NIH website, but as many government websites on the federal level, they tend to have long URLs. You can find Hearts and Parks at NRPA's website, and then link to the NIH resources. The guide is downloadable. What is the greatest tool is the assessment tools for both youth and adults for pre- and post-testing.

ANDREWS: Great. As we were talking about the Hearts and Parks, I also know that you have some familiarity with the We Can program. Susan, could you also share how you guys have incorporated that into South Bend?

O'CONNOR: Sure. At the conclusion of Hearts and Parks, NHLDI went into a study and a program that they called We Can, and it focuses on children between the ages of eight and thirteen and working with parents and again, the focus on nutrition, physical activity, and screen time. They do have the testing assessments as well, the pre- and post-, and we were selected as one of 16 communities across the nation to participate in this. And basically, it is focusing directly into that area.

Now what we really did is we took everything from our Hearts and Parks background, and we just really focused right on that and moved that in with the We Can. And that is basically the same programs that we are doing. And it's again changing lifestyles.

SPANGLER: And Leon, what's interesting about We Can is it's currently an in-research project. What happened during the three years with Hearts and Parks is we generated interest in about 1,500 communities that wanted to be part of the Hearts and Parks field study, and the federal government needs to do the research. And so these agencies that are stepping up, and many of them were Hearts and Parks communities, to continue the research level was critically important. What we chose to do was recapture those 1,500 communities, and we launched Step Up to Health, which allowed us to do the basic training that was built through Hearts and Parks and to provide the framework for communities to mobilize around health promotion in a way that would advance their efforts.

And so I think Susan and South Bend, they're to be lauded for wanting to do that heavy lifting at a research level, and we've tried to reach out to those broader communities -- Paul representing one -- who have now become Step Up to Health [www.nrpa.org/health] focused. And again, I think there are so many resources out there in terms of strategies and campaigns. Our objective is to make sure that we build in the right kind of framework for people to effectively make an impact.

ANDREWS: Good. I want to make sure I include this. There is a question that came from one of our listeners. This is for Paul and for Susan in particular. What role do liability concerns play in parks and recreation department strategies that encourage physical activity?

O'CONNOR: For South Bend, when we have the kids involved in our programs, the parents have to sign off on a waiver form and obviously a medical form letting us know of any health issues that they may have. And any concerns that come up, we will say before they participate in the program, we will ask them to get a physician's release for them to participate. And we have found a very positive response that the pediatricians are very supportive of, yes, get them involved, get them active. If there are any limitations, they let us know, but it's very rare.

WIDMAN: And we have similar policies in Nashville and have a great relationship with our legal department to make sure that our waivers and any parent consent forms address those liability issues.

SPANGLER: Leon, if I could go back just a second to the school-based effort -- I think it's of importance for the listening audience to know that with the reauthorization of the USDA's Nutrition Act, schools around the country are being challenged if they're going to receive federal funding to complete a school wellness policy. And this effectively is supposed to be done by June '06, but we know many of the school systems will be working on their school policies through the summer. I think that this is a prime opportunity for community-based organizations and particularly park and recreation agencies, because they are part of the local government, to engage the schools. Because the challenge I think for keeping young people engaged during the school hours and then making sure that the afterschool as well as home-based opportunities for physical activity, there is consistency across the practice.

I was recently at the National School Boards Association [www.nsba.org] conference on this topic, and they are very keen to be aware of those non-school related resources. We've got examples of Springfield-Greene County, Missouri [www.parkboard.org], where they are building all of their playgrounds at local schools, or Milwaukee [www.countyparks.com], where at the end of the school day, the park and recreation system

takes over all of the schools in the city to program. Uniquely, Miami-Dade County [www.miamidade.gov/parks], for example, their physical education program has evolved to a place where they're taking the classes into the recreational environment, teaching young people life skills.

And I think that's the challenge of the day, is teaching young people to enjoy physical activity, not forcing exercise, but giving them life skills so that they can go fishing, they can go swimming, they can go kayaking and canoeing. And the recreational environment is a natural setting for school-based involvement -- incredibly important when you think in terms of the PEP legislation that provides for afterschool programming, where park and recreation agencies are very often enlisted as the subcontractor to those funds. And it even extends to the nutrition side, where again park and recreation agencies are the largest provider of the summer food service program nationwide. And so we connect very closely and align well. We need to do more heavy lifting to make sure there's continuity across policies and practices in school and community environments.

ANDREWS: And Kathy kind of brings up these broader questions for the city parks and recreation departments in terms of likely partners. And I wanted to use that as a bridge into talking a little bit more about who are likely partners for the parks and recreation departments to consider. And even from the lens of a local level of what's happening in Nashville and South Bend. Paul and Susan, could you guys share in terms of likely partners that you guys have worked with through the parks and recreation departments?

O'CONNOR: Absolutely. South Bend, I can tell you that we are working at the local grocery stores here in town, the local grocery store chains, the chefs association, the health department, two of the local hospitals, extension agencies through Purdue University and our South Bend schools. We are very involved with our schools and we have a great working relationship. We have first priority in all of the schools after all the school activities have been programmed. So we've got a real gem here to work with.

ANDREWS: You didn't just all of a sudden get there, I would imagine. It took some time and convincing along the way, Susan, I imagine. Could you explain a little bit about how you were able to generate those types of supports to the different partners that you have?

O'CONNOR: Well, to be honest with you, when we came back from our training with Hearts and Parks, we went to a lot of these partners, and they were on board right away because obviously it is a concern for all the communities, and everybody wants to be on board. They know we have the facilities. They know we have the access to get the youth involved in our program. So they were very supportive from the onset. And then once we went through the three-year program with Hearts and Parks and we become a We Can program, we just kind of expanded on that horizon of partnerships and people were able to see what we've done around our community. Visual was real important for us. We put up signs in the majority of all of our parks that list -- "If you walk from this point to this point, you've burned X amount of calories." And it is amazing -- such a simple, simple thing and the amount of people who would stop and comment and read those signs, and the success of what that brought about in our community in just that one small example.

ADAMS: I would like to go back to something before it escapes me, which has to do with times of day. And that is that when we talk about use of schools, I want you to know -- and I am so delighted to hear that Susan has got such a great relationship with her schools, because not everybody has that. So Susan, really hold that tight and don't let it go.

O'CONNOR: We hope to.

ADAMS: Yeah, because there are many, many examples of cities, recreation and park departments that really want to get in and work at the schools, and they can't for any number of reasons. So I really would encourage those local policymakers that are sitting in on this call to make sitting down and having a conversation with your school board members about exactly what are the barriers that are stopping the community's use of the school facilities. And many communities, especially some of our rural communities, transportation is a huge issue, very, very expensive -- I mean, gasoline this summer is going to kill us all. But transportation costs are just prohibitive. And so we really need to take advantage of those existing facilities that we already have. So I really, really encourage the city officials that are sitting in on this call to take a moment and to go have coffee with your school board members and find out what's stopping a partnership, because it could be something very easy to get over.

I've got a couple of other really good examples about some partnerships. In the Greater San Diego area, there are 14 city recreation and park departments in San Diego County have joined together to create the Greater San Diego Recreation and Parks Coalition for Health and Wellness. These agencies get together on a periodic basis, and they are using the same messages in their brochures. They have a logo that they use to label those programs that promote physical activity and wellness. And this is just proving to be very, very successful for them. So if there are people sitting in on the call and you're surrounded by other recreation and park departments, call all those people together and sit down and have a conversation with them. And they have created a website. You can go visit www.goplaygetfit.com, and you'll learn all about the Greater San Diego Coalition.

ANDREWS: Paul, could you share with us your lens in Nashville in terms of the partnerships that you've built, the challenges that you've faced, even maybe as Jane was talking about, with the school system, how you have made attempts to try to engage the school system, how successful you've been? Kind of just talk about your partnerships?

WIDMAN: Sure. I mentioned Alignment Nashville, which is a coalition that combines a lot of organizations here in Nashville. And we have a lot of programs going out of that. And Kathy kind of hit on this -- one of the things that came out of the committee meetings and the discussions of Alignment Nashville is that we need to maintain our identity. We don't want our youth participants to come into the community center and get the 30 - 40 minutes of physical education they get at the school. We try to keep a wide variety of activities. And we saw that as being one of the roles, to keep it -- from the time the kids leave school, they can come over into our programs and remain and have a high level of physical activity. And we're moving forward with a lot of those specific partnerships with the schools at this time as a result of those discussions.

One of the partnerships that came up as a result of the Step Up to Health summit, which we attended -- I attended in March 2005, and then we made part of our state conferences

this past November. We're working a lot more with our Public Health Department here in Nashville. And what has grown out of that is they are able to reach a lot more youth through our community centers than they would in some of the other facilities that they have. And they have a lot of resources for health screenings. They have a lot of outreach programs that are now run through our community centers.

SPANGLER: And I would echo that the public health community is a clear target for a partner. As Susan said, the cooperative extension on the nutrition side can be a very effective partner within government parameters. But don't forget, for those of you who are senior management in parks and recreation, the planning departments, the work through Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through Active Living By Design [www.activelivingbydesign.org] and Active Living Research [www.activelivingresearch.org] is really engaging these other stakeholders that are looking to reengineer activity through environmental prompts and redesigns. And so the planning department is somewhat, whether you have that inside your agency or whether that's part of the municipal or county function, they're becoming more aware of this issue.

We're hearing of local departments who are managing events by moving the parking lot further away from the event to provide a natural opportunity for walking. So again, what we can do physically in our environments as well as programmatically to ensure that there is an increased level of activity is something that the stakeholders within government alone can be vitally important. But no less the private and non-profit sectors can be critically valuable to embrace because of their expertise and their resources to support what you have to do.

ADAMS: Leon, I just wanted to elaborate, if I could, on one of our partnerships, which is our local chefs association. They work with us and come out to all of our special events, and they will provide healthy snacks for the kids, that actually the kids interact at these events. But also they go into a neighborhood recreation center, and they have gone to our food bank and have found where a majority of the participants might be grocery shopping, so that they can come up with healthy recipes and alternatives for them so that they do not have to have a diet that is high in starch or just lacking a lot of the vegetables and fruits that they wouldn't normally get. And I think this partnership, along with our grocery store, they have really been just a true blessing for us to have them on board because they have come up with supplying the food for their special events and coming into certain camps and providing snacks on certain days for them. They obviously couldn't do it every single day.

But I think one of the biggest challenges that parks and recreations face is the funding, that in order to offer good healthy programming to a lot of these kids when they're in a day camp situation, it's more expensive to feed them healthier.

WIDMAN: Leon, can I mention one more partnership?

ANDREWS: Yes.

WIDMAN: We've talked a lot about likely partnerships and some of those that are kind of a natural fit. We recently wrote a grant for a ballroom dance program for youth and teens. And at first, I laughed at that idea. I didn't think the teens would warm up to it. But we took some of the ideas that we got from Step Up to Health and some of the training. We wrote it up as a health program. It's going to include nutrition education, of course, a lot of physical activity.

We received the grant, and it's going to be in nine of our 23 community centers.

What's happened is, there is a local dance studio that heard about this, and they thought, hey, this may not be such a bad idea to market their services to that population. That's a whole new market for them. So we have them on board. We're not sure what level of support we'll receive, but they're definitely throwing their hat in the ring on that. And I think that's one thing we've learned, that as the momentum grows, as -- you know, we talk a lot about leadership -- once that momentum starts to roll, a lot of people want to get on board, and there are a lot of groups out there I think that have a lot to offer that we've not tapped yet.

ANDREWS: We've done a good job beginning to highlight relationships that the city parks and recreation departments can form -- with the schools, maybe with businesses, chef associations, and other business organizations. I think a good transition for us with some of the remaining time is to spend some time talking about how to engage parents to tackle childhood obesity. And in fact, one of the listeners was thinking in the same way that I was thinking as we were trying to make the transition, talking about parents and educating parents. The caller's question is, "It seems that good eating habits and exercise should start in the home. But what are parents doing to get involved?" -- in Nashville, in South Bed, or what you guys are seeing, Kathy and Jane, from your work?

ADAMS: I've got a couple of great examples here, if I could share them. The City of Tracy in the Central Valley has got a Healthy Habits program. And they have altered the food menus in their afterschool program and at the teen centers. They've developed a calendar, which is available through the recreation and parks department, that every day it lists something to do or a place to go. They are creating their own marathon where citizens -- and certainly this could be a great family activity where the community center or the program could maintain kind of that list and that tracking -- but the families could walk a marathon together, or maybe even work up to where they're running a marathon.

And I've been contacted by a couple of departments on the other side of the country, like in New England, who say they want to walk -- they have a group of kids, and the kids want to walk to California. So could I give them the name of a recreation and park department in California that maybe a group of kids there could begin to walk to Vermont, and we could all meet in the middle and -- certainly not physically meet in the middle -- but figure out places of contact and then share experiences with what is going on.

Also, L.A.'s Best, which is a huge afterschool programs that services Los Angeles children, has got a Best Fit campaign that is really quite amazing, and I would encourage people to go to their website and check out L.A.'s Best [www.lasbest.org].

ANDREWS: What I would like to see -- maybe even Paul or Susan more at the local level -- do you guys have any examples of specifically what parents are doing to get involved in the work there?

WIDMAN: I'll just jump in. What I've seen here in Nashville is the effort we made to formalize the relationship we have with our parents. By that, we've conducted parent meetings. Our recreation staff, our front line staff, has taken the reins of that, and it's not uncommon to go through our community centers and see signs posted of the next parent meeting. And that is just a great opportunity to sit down with your parents, get their ideas, feedback, but also let them

know what we're trying to do with our programs to give the nutrition messages. And that's the most difficult beast we have right now is the nutrition component of our programs. We did that at the beginning of the summer programs last year, and we were able to see a big improvement in the lunches that were brought in. We were able to convey why we don't have vending machines, why we don't provide sodas and the sugary snacks. I just think anything you can do to formalize that relationship through meetings, through parent groups is a big help.

ADAMS: The City of Roseville [www.roseville.ca.us/parks/default.asp], which is here in California, they hosted a kids' health and fitness expo last September. And the goals were to provide those educational opportunities for both kids and parents. And then they partnered with Kaiser Permanente, which is a large health organization out here, and they helped kids understand and parents understand the food pyramid. So I think we're finding that if we can engage the parent at the same time we're engaging a child, that's when you get the better message delivery and the better way that the message is received.

SPANGLER: Leon, I was just in Howard County, Maryland [www.co.ho.md.us/RAP/RAP_Homepage.htm] at their preschool program for learning how to play sports. And they didn't learn how to play alone. The parents participated right there with their child. I think it's critically important -- I think Paul is absolutely right -- we need to inform and educate our parents and make them aware, because even in Hearts and Parks, we saw that children will be responsive to learning new behaviors, but their reinforcement at home is of critical importance to maintain that healthy behavior. And so engaging the parent -- and in particular, we haven't talked a lot about ethnicity.

But the populations at higher risk for inactivity and overweight among youth are African-American children and Latino children. And in many cases, the nutrition becomes very much a larger value to focus on in terms of cooking with fish and fresh vegetables. And so infusing parents in the programming and engaging them in the learning process, we found with focus groups with Latinos that they were very open to learning new skills with their children. And we need to embrace that as a systematic approach to our programming, that family activity and teaching skills across the lifespan from what age this activity around health is critically important for giving youth in particular opportunities to maintain those healthy behaviors they might learn in our settings.

ANDREWS: What about from a city parks and recreation lens? Is there a way or some ideas that the city parks and rec can engage parents, whether it's in the planning around activities or things maybe even as it relates to the physical activities that you were talking about, Kathy, within Howard County? Do we have some other ideas of ways that city parks and rec departments can engage parents?

ADAMS: I think what I mentioned a little bit ago where one of the recreation and park departments sent a letter home -- when after the child had registered for the summer program is the example here -- and told the parents that the day camp program that summer was going to be a "healthy and active day camp program." And so they asked the parents to support the child by again -- and they gave them a list of foods that are healthy and snacks that the child could bring for lunch. They were told that the child was going to be given a water bottle with their name on it that was going to be washed every day. So the child was encouraged to drink a lot of water.

And this director reported that she got a lot of calls from parents saying, “Thank you, thank you, thank you! I now have more food choices to send to them when they go away for the day.” So she got very positive response from that -- again, kind of small step, but a very positive one.

O’CONNOR: Leon, I think one of the successes that South Bend has seen, more from parents who have visuals. We have a lot of things that we put out just every day in our halls. There are fat tube displays that would show you how much fat is in a hamburger, how much fat is in an order of French fries. And the responses that we get from the people that come up and look at these boards -- and they’re broken down by -- we’ve got a sugar board, a salt board and four different fat tube boards that really depict the different things. And they are just so amazed at how much is in the food they’re eating. And we have a very diverse community, and we just had a camp fair here two weeks ago. We had -- it may not sound like a lot to many people, but we did have 26 parents who signed up to participate in a parent program with us to learn more about nutrition and to learn more ways to get physically fit with their families.

ANDREWS: The visuals actually sound very fascinating, Susan, just to see how our youth would respond to that.

O’CONNOR: And there are so many more things -- we have five pounds of fat vs. five pounds of muscle -- that really gets them talking a lot. We have a portion distortion chart that shows what an actual food size -- what you should actually be eating and what you’re being served. And today we have flipcharts that show how many calories are in a candy bar, and what you have to do to burn the calories in that. And I tell you, it is amazing for all walks of life that come in. And we use this from our youth centers through our senior centers. And it is just a very, very effective way to get the message across to people.

ADAMS: One of our local departments here, too, their teen center, they have -- every afternoon, they have to have at least 30 minutes of physical activity. So they’ll put on music and all the kids will dance. And it’s very important that the youth center staff also participate. And they also are creating a youth center cookbook, where the kids are creating recipes and are testing them out, and they’re going to put together this cookbook and sell it. And again, that’s another great tool that kids can take home, and then they would be willing to share that with their whole family. So I think there are some really, really great, great things going on out there.

ANDREWS: And the way we’re couching this -- are we saying that you guys would all agree that these are approaches that are realistic from what a city parks or recreation department could take in terms of responding to this issue?

SPANGLER: Leon, what was fascinating about Hearts and Parks -- and of course, we would have loved to have provided financial support for the communities to get started with their Hearts and Parks initiatives -- but we provided them training, but no financial support. Resources are tight, and Susan would tell you, they had to work with partners, and additional resources were always welcome. But at the point of contact today, a park and recreation agency has a significant amount of resources, programming, facilities, staff, volunteers, parent-led groups, organizations that they connect with, that it’s about turning the dial 45 degrees. It is about that small step. It’s about creating a cultural shift towards pursuing a healthy lifestyle and

utilizing recreation and parks as an asset for health and livability. The notion of “programs for programs’ sake” are trending away, and I think we’re moving to a place where our field is far more intentional about an impact that improves the quality of life of citizens who live, work and play in our cities. But we want to leverage the assets that we already have. Would more be better? Absolutely, no question. But can we get started now? There is no doubt.

ADAMS: We haven’t really talked too much, Leon, if you will, about some of the bigger policy pieces. And one of them I just heard about is that the City of Chino is including a health element in their general plan. And I believe they feel they’re the first city in California to do this, and so they’re very proud and they’re just undertaking this area. And the City of Sacramento [www.cityofsacramento.org/parksandrecreation] has a health and wellness portion in their master plan. So I’m wondering if either Susan or Paul, if you’ve included any sort of health and wellness initiatives in either of your master plans or your strategic plans.

O’CONNOR: South Bend has -- we have put components within our master plan. We just opened up our fitness facility in December. The size has tripled and our membership went from 800 to 1,300 members. And we definitely are committed in this community to wellness. And that is through whatever steps that would take. And I refer back again to those signs in the park. We look at ways that we can educate the public in any way just to get them out and get them moving.

ADAMS: Now, let me ask you something here. Did you do this work on your own? I mean, I’m not saying on your own necessarily. I know you had other staff working with you. But was this directed by your city council for you to begin this health and wellness initiative? Or did you take this on yourself as something that you and your department saw as very critical?

O’CONNOR: Actually, our parks superintendent is very, very supportive of the wellness program, and he has made a big push in this area. And when we became the Hearts and Parks site four years ago, this is when things began to really change for us around here.

ADAMS: Did your city council get involved in deciding to be a Hearts and Parks site?

O’CONNOR: No, they didn’t. It really came from within our department here. Obviously our city is very supportive of it and is very proud of the things that we’ve been able to do through this department. But the initiative really came from within the staff here.

SPANGLER: Paul, you’ve got the support of your mayor in Nashville, correct?

WIDMAN: Yes, and I was going to -- you talked about our master plan and strategic plan. I wanted to let you know that we do address health and wellness in many different ways, through facilities, through planning and programs. And one recent example of delivering on that -- we just opened up the Hadley Regional Community Center. And it is approximately 40,000 square feet. It’s a first for us in Nashville to have all the components it has under one roof, and all the space is dedicated to health and wellness. We have indoor aquatics, a walking track and fitness equipment and classrooms and a senior operation.

Our mayor has been very supportive. One example -- I know time is coming to a

close here, but if you could look at -- let me get that for you -- it's our Healthy Nashville 2010. It's healthweb.nashville.org, and follow the links, and it will outline that. It serves as an umbrella -- the leadership of Healthy Nashville 2010 is appointed by our mayor through executive order. And our director, Roy Wilson, is currently serving as the chair for Healthy Nashville 2010. And that's really given us a lot of clout. A lot of partnerships have formed from that. And again, this is driven by the Office of the Mayor.

SPANGLER: Leon, as we come to close, I want to make sure that community leaders as well as the park and recreation community can find some additional support for great ideas and examples of community effort in this area. You can Google "Step Up to Health" and find a number of examples of how communities and their leaders have embraced health and wellness for youth and for the community. You can also check out the NRPA website -- www.nrpa.org/health. And we have a growing list of community examples from cities across the country that have begun the process of mobilizing around this issue in a significant way.

ANDREWS: As you guys have noted, we are coming toward the end of our call. And I wanted to -- we have time for one more question, and then I'd like to allow our panelists to share any kind of parting thoughts around this question. If you could recommend one step or strategy for a city parks and recreation department to take in attempting to reduce childhood obesity, what would it be? What would you recommend even to a mayor or a city councilperson? And that's a very kind of clear -- for those that are on the call, giving each of you guys to share your thoughts there.

But before we do that wrap-up, we did leave off a very important part -- a question, and maybe Nashville particularly and South Bend can respond to this. Have you guys done anything at your local level to engage young people particularly around addressing obesity, getting their ideas of ways of them being a part of the process?

WIDMAN: We have in Nashville. We have a Mayor's Youth Council. And we have two representatives that serve from our department. They are youth liaisons to the Youth Council. And policy, programs are directed at youth issues. It's the goal of that council. And we've taken some ideas from that, and this next year, we hope to develop our own Metroparks Youth Advisory Committee. We've seen a need for that just to get the feedback we need to make sure our programs are relevant and up to date.

We do get a lot of youth feedback, and we have similar kind of feedback -- informal advisory -- youth at our community centers, and we need to formalize that. But as far as the citywide effort, I can't tell you enough about the youth council and what that's done for our program.

ANDREWS: Great. Why don't we end it with you guys sharing -- why don't we go around, starting with maybe Jane this time? Do you have a recommendation to those listening on the call, to the mayor or city council member or to the city parks and recreation department -- a recommendation, one step or strategy for them to reduce childhood obesity?

ADAMS: I'd like to give a plug for a document that we wrote a couple of years ago. It's called "Reading to Promote Health and Wellness." And it's available on our website, which is www.cprs.org. And they need to click on the button that says "Creating Community." This is a

28-page document that gives any park and recreation professional and policy maker all the steps they need to take to begin to address this very critical issue.

ANDREWS: Great. Kathy?

SPANGLER: I think the first recommendation we'd make is convene a stakeholder summit. Bring the key stakeholders together, the early adopters, and have a candid conversation about what's possible so that you can rally around the assets you already have, rather than looking at the problem and wondering what next.

ANDREWS: Great, thank you. Paul?

WIDMAN: I would say leadership and -- I should warn, that they go hand in hand -- is training. I would highly recommend the Step Up to Health summit. It's provided a great deal of leadership for us. And I would just say that the playground leader or the rec leader in the community center needs to be on message, just as your leadership in your department or in your agency.

ANDREWS: Great. Susan?

O'CONNOR: I would have to agree with the leadership. Our mayor as well is very supportive of all our efforts here. And I think that when it is seen at the top of the leadership that it is bought in for your whole community. And Paul, I echo -- the training is important -- very, very important.

ANDREWS: Great. I want to thank you guys, my panel, for your time and wonderful thoughts and insights today. We've been joined by Kathy Spangler, the National Partners Director for the National Recreation and Park Association -- thank you, Kathy.

SPANGLER: Thank you.

ANDREWS: Jane Adams, the Executive Director of the California Park and Recreation Society -- thank you, Jane.

ADAMS: It's a pleasure -- thank you.

ANDREWS: Paul Widman, the Assistant Director of Metroparks in Nashville, Tennessee -- thanks, Paul.

WIDMAN: Thank you.

ANDREWS: And Susan O'Connor, the Recreation Director with the South Bend Parks and Recreation Department in Indiana -- thanks, Susan.

O'CONNOR: Thank you, Leon.

ANDREWS: I'm Leon Andrews, Program Director of Youth Development at the Institute for Youth, Education and Families at the National League of Cities. Join us for future audioconferences. We are holding them on a monthly basis, and you can find more information on our website. Again, it's www.nlc.org/iyef. Thanks again.