***Program Assessment, Challenge or Need that Prompted Program Development***

In 2007, due to funding challenges the City of Evanston eliminated clinic services. With two local hospitals and a number of community health care providers to absorb the patient load this decision was made in good faith. Unfortunately, the patient load was overwhelming and the already overburdened system became even more challenging for residents to navigate and access care. Through the two most recent community health assessments (conducted every 5 years) physical activity, chronic illness and access to care were identified as major issues for residents. In response to this need, the Women Out Walking (WOW) program was created in 2009.

Given the underlying cause of a number of chronic illnesses can be tied to physical activity and nutrition, a preventative program focused at improved activity and nutrition levels seemed to be appropriate. Additionally, walking is an activity that most people can participate in at little to no cost and can benefit from immediately. WOW was a creative way to:

* Encourage people to become more active
* Introduce people to services and activities with which they may not be familiar
* Identify health issues at an earlier stage through screenings
* Leverage City partnerships to connect people to needed services

A secondary function of the program was to create community and support local businesses. By establishing walking teams we were able to cultivate community. Additionally, since we’ve had 500 - 1,100 women to participate in the program annually, we have invited local businesses to provide program incentives. In turn we provide an opportunity for businesses to advertise product and services, as well as scheduling walking routes through business districts and providing supporting businesses with signage identifying them as a supported of WOW.

Although we feel this program addressed the challenge stated, there is still a real concern around finance and sustainability…even for a program of this nature. To that end, we creatively developed and offered this program to residents free of charge, so that it is accessible to all. Additionally, WOW has been offered at no additional cost to the City. This has been achieved through grants, corporate sponsorship, in-kind services and use of advertising opportunities.

***Program Implementation and Cost***

The Evanston Health Department’s Women Out Walking (WOW) program is a 12 week walking program designed to encourage women to lead healthier lifestyles and become more physically active. Using walking as the foundation, individuals and teams of women are asked to track their steps and seek to improve their activity level on a weekly basis.

From March through June regular workshops provide tips, screenings and education in the areas of nutrition and overall women’s health issues. In addition to walking, participants explore a variety of physical activity alternatives, including tai chi, yoga; Nia, dance, and other exciting exercise opportunities. Weekly challenges and prizes for both individuals and teams provide incentives to help keep participants engaged.

Each walker receives a walking journal, pedometer, and WOW t-shirt. The program is free to residents ($5 for non-residents) and is open to women of all ages and fitness levels who are part of our community, which we define as anyone who lives, works, plays, and learns in the Evanston community.

Participants are recruited through our website, Face book; flyers posted at City facilities, non-profit agencies, and through partnerships with faith based community organizations. This approach has not only provided a large number of participants, but the group is fairly diverse with each of Evanston’s nine wards being equally represented. Program events and walks take place on Saturdays at City facilities, unless a local partner has requested the event take place at there organization for a particular reason. We utilize a free online step tracking software that allows participants (or their team member) to enter team and individual progress and receive tips or encouragement through the online tool or via our website. The cost of the program is approximately $20,000, but as mentioned previously, this program is not only offered at no cost to the City, but it has turned a profit in 3 out of the 4 years it was offered (the year that it didn’t turn a profit, it was budget neutral).

***Tangible Results or Measurable Outcomes***

Participants were given a pre and post program survey. The survey consists of 5 questions related to general health, physical activity levels, eating habits, mental health, and access to care/physician. General health perceptions remained at the same level at pre and post test, but there was a five to ten percent cumulative increase in physical activity levels, eating habits, mental health, and access to care/physician compared to the pre-testing. This is not surprising as it would take some time for general health to be impacted, whereas health behaviors, stress levels and accessing care can be more immediately improved.

Anecdotally, it was reported to us that women enjoyed participating in this type of activity with other women who shared the same goal. They also reported enjoying time spent walking and talking with others. For some, they used the time to talk about relationships, sexual health, and life challenges with their teenage daughters. Others used it as an opportunity to not focus on more serious health issues like cancer. All expressed their appreciation for the City getting involved an offering a program like this for free. Last, we host a large kickoff event that includes fitness class samplers, a health service area (where people can learn about available community health services) and screenings. This past year we had 45% of pre-register participants (~400 people) take advantage of screening services. Screenings included a weight analysis, blood pressure screening, body mass index assessment (BMI), and referrals for blood glucose level screening.

***Lessons Learned During Planning, Implementation, and Program Implementation***

The lessons learned from the planning stage include:

* The need to establish strong partnerships – the relationships that we have cultivated have been essential for offering an effective program. Our partners are committed to funding the program annually. Additionally, our direct service partners allow us to assume the role of facilitator, link people to services, and keep our costs at a minimum.
* Involvement of the non-profit and faith based community – although we have become more transparent and communicate more directly as a City, a segment of our population is still difficult to access or prefers a more traditional method of communicating. To that end, working through social service agencies and faith communities has been an invaluable part of our marketing strategy. The majority of our participants heard about the program through word-of-mouth.
* We have developed a WOW Planning Committee of women in our target group and past participants. This strategy helps us to ensure that we are consistently improving and offering a relevant program, but it creates an onus in this group to ensure program success.

Lessons learned from the implementation stage include:

* Keep it simple –the program’s structure gives participants direction, but is not too stringent. The program should be accessible and not overwhelm anyone with numerous activities.
* Understand the diversity of your group – we try to get a sense of life time constraints and plan accordingly. This is a work in progress.
* Responsible growth – participants have communicated to us the success of the program is related to its ability to create community, connect individuals with new friends and staff’s accessibility. We must be mindful of this as we grow the program to not forget about this.

Lessons learned from program analysis:

* Data was important for us to collect to justify the usefulness of the program and to have a benchmark by which participants measure improvement.
* Program evaluation – we asked for feedback on how the program improved and received suggestions about the potential offering of midweek evening activities to accommodate those that can’t attend the Saturday events.