

# Carry that weight

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, April 2, 2015 6:00 am

BENTON TOWNSHIP - The Be Healthy Berrien partnership is ready to do some heavy lifting to help residents eat nutritious foods, exercise more and lose weight.

Heather Cole, the coordinator for Be Healthy Berrien, presented a five-year plan to the county Board of Health Wednesday that promotes better choices at work, school and in the community.

"It's about building a community where the healthy choice becomes the easy choice," said Cole, hired last July to oversee the coalition created in 2010.

Be Healthy Berrien is led by the Berrien County Health Department, Lakeland HealthCare, the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, United Way of Southwest Michigan, and the Benton Harbor-St. Joseph and Niles YMCAs. It is funded, in part, through grants from Gov. Rick Snyder's 4x4 wellness campaign.

Accomplishments include a website that lists locations where residents can exercise and where they can buy fresh fruits and vegetables, such as farmers markets.

Last year it teamed up with Andrews University to provide a mobile farmers market that traveled to low-income neighborhoods with limited access to fresh produce. That effort will continue this year.

In 2013 and 2014 it mounted the Million Mile Challenge, encouraging residents to collectively walk, run and move while logging their progress on the website.

There won't be a Million Mile Challenge this year, said Nicki Britten, the health department's director of community health planning, as Be Healthy Berrien shifts from focusing on individual behavior to a revamping of the entire community.

A change is greatly needed, health advocates insist. In Berrien County, almost 40 percent of adults are obese, and another 31 percent are overweight and at risk of becoming obese.

Thirty percent of adults report getting no leisure time physical activity, and only 17 percent eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day.

There is no reliable data on childhood obesity and other youth health statistics in Berrien County. But



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surveys show that 18-to-24-year-olds lag behind in eating right and getting exercise, bad habits they likely required in childhood.

One goal of Be Health Berrien's plan is to decrease the percentage of obese adults by 10 percent by 2020, Cole said.

Just educating the public on healthy choices has the least impact, according to research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Public policies that make it easier to choose a healthy lifestyle have been shown to have a greater impact.

The five-year plan throws out a wide net.

Be Healthy Berrien and its partners propose to contact 75 employers over the next five years, with the goal of convincing half of them to implement at least one worksite wellness policy by 2020.

The coalition will be talking to elected officials about how their decisions can affect the health of residents. By 2020 it wants to see half of urban residents living within a quarter-mile of at least one recreation location.

It will push to have 20 additional miles of paved road shoulders for walking and biking put on the drawing board.

Be Healthy Berrien wants to see half of Lakeland physicians discuss body mass index (a measure of height and weight) during a patient's annual exam. A body mass index calculator will be added to the Be Healthy Berrien website by next year.

Another goal is to increase the percentage of residents eating the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables.

To accomplish this, the coalition will lobby for zoning that allows for more community gardening and urban farming. Advocates want 25 percent of all farmers markets to accept Bridge cards that provide food assistance to low-income residents.

The plan calls for asking K-12 schools to expand their physical education classes, and to make school gyms, weight rooms and pools available to the public. It also proposes to increase the number of schools that are part of the Michigan Team Nutrition program, which provides nutrition education to kids.

Cole acknowledged that reducing obesity is a long-term problem and there is no quick fix. But she does see momentum toward a solution.

Duane McBride, chairman of the Board of Health, said Be Healthy Berrien has bitten off more than it can swallow.

"These are modest goals," McBride said. "In the past perhaps we have been too ambitious. It's tough to

change a culture of fast food and high salt and sugar."

Information is at [www.behealthyberrien.org](http://www.behealthyberrien.org). Cole can be reached at [BeHealthyBerrien@gmail.com](mailto:BeHealthyBerrien@gmail.com).

Contact: [jmatuszak@theHP.com](mailto:jmatuszak@theHP.com), 932-0360, Twitter: [@HPMatuszak](https://twitter.com/HPMatuszak)