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Catholic Charities moves on childhood obesity

by Tom Gallagher

Mission Management



Kids join in the filming of Catholic Charities' video for Beyoncé's Let's Move anthem, "Move Your Body." (Jennifer Sirota)

Theologians who study Pope John Paul II's theology of the body might consider adding a new chapter to that work, a chapter the late, athletically inclined pope would no doubt approve, a chapter for the too many Americans in deep, deep trouble. The wrong kind of calories and not enough exercise have created an unprecedented childhood obesity epidemic in the United States.

The statistics are both staggering and unconscionable. According to the federal government, over the past three decades, childhood obesity rates in America have tripled, and today, nearly one in three children in America is overweight or obese. The numbers are even higher in African American and Hispanic communities, where nearly 40% of the children are overweight or obese.

Two years ago President Barack Obama established a federal Task Force on Childhood Obesity that is headed by Michelle Obama. The first lady created a public awareness campaign called "Let's Move" with the goal of reducing childhood obesity to 5 percent by 2030. As part of this effort, the U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services created an initiative called "Let's Move Faith and Communities."

"It's clear that when it comes to ensuring our children's health and well-being, when it comes to tackling childhood obesity, our faith-based and community organizations have a critical role to play," according to Michelle Obama's statement on the Let's Move website.

At least one of the 195 dioceses in the United States has signed on to the Let's Move Campaign. Catholic Charities in Michelle Obama's hometown, Chicago, has jumped in with both feet.

"The Catholic church has always been engaged with the government to address hunger with food programs," said Angel Gutierrez, vice president of community development and outreach services for the Chicago archdiocese's Catholic Charities. Gutierrez cites the Women, Infants, and Children Program and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, among others in which Catholic Charities participates.

"We try to connect the dots and address an array of issues facing the communities we serve," Gutierrez said. "We partner with many other organizations and try to co-locate multiple initiatives at our sites." Catholic Charities is the largest social service provider in Chicago and includes 16 food centers across the region.

"Through our nutrition programs we provide foods that reflect the basic principles of the dietary guidelines to include more fruit, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy," said Diane Nunley, Chicago Catholic Charities' associate director of special supplemental food and nutrition.

But it wasn't until Catholic Charities' 2009 Summer Food Program that Gutierrez realized that kids needed more than healthy food. "We began to understand that kids are often sedentary and we needed to find ways to get them engaged in physical activity," he said.

The Summer Food Program served more than 311,000 meals at 208 sites serving 21,000 children last year.

In late 2010, Gutierrez attended the official launch of the Let's Move Faith and Communities in Washington, D.C.

"As part of a healthy lifestyle, food and activity should be fun and easy to do, especially for our kids," Nunley said. "We encourage fun activities, and healthy treats in moderation, to provide kids with a foundation for lifelong, healthy living."

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With a new focus on physical activity, a Catholic Charities nutrition aide created an education curriculum called "The ABC's of Fitness and Nutrition" by combining healthy food with physical activity. For example, K is for *kiwi* and *kick*. The curriculum is employed at the feeding sites.

It created "Activities in a Box," which are bins filled with jump ropes, balls and exercise dice, and distributed these bins to the feeding sites.

"We also used the Let's Move educational handouts on the top five things to know," said Jennifer Sirota, Catholic Charities project director and marketing specialist for community development and outreach services. "Our focus is on nutrition education and physical activity as preventative measures for fighting obesity."

‘We believe that there are many simple things we can do to get kids active,’ Gutierrez said. ‘Hopscotch, jumping rope, using a Hula-Hoop don’t cost a lot of money to implement.’

The award-winning pop singer Beyoncé rewrote the lyrics to her song ‘Move Your Body,’ as part of the Let’s Move initiative. ‘We taught the kids how to dance to Beyoncé’s song and they loved it,’ Sirota said.

Wellness as a lifestyle seems to be catching on for the employees as well. Catholic Charities staff has set up a wellness committee.

‘We are so busy taking care of others that we need to take a step back and realize that ‘I too need to change,’ ‘ Gutierrez said. ‘Employees are beginning to take wellness seriously.’

More employees are outside during lunch taking walks. More than 350 staff members participated in the Presidential Active Lifestyle Award challenge last year. Nine employees ran the Chicago Marathon this past fall.

‘Anybody and everybody can do this as it doesn’t require a lot of money to get up and walk or to use the stairs or have a soup and salad versus a burger,’ Gutierrez said.

Are other dioceses following Chicago’s lead? ‘I’m trying to get more dioceses involved, but these wellness initiatives need a champion,’ he said.

Gutierrez was invited back to the White House this past December and he shared the story of the Catholic Charities’ substantial programmatic efforts to address childhood obesity.

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR*’s Mission Management column. Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

Online Resources

Let’s Move
www.letsmove.gov

Let’s Move Faith and Communities
www.hhs.gov/partnerships/letsmove

Chicago Catholic Charities ‘Let’s Move’ Dance Video

Chicago Catholic Charities’ ‘Feeding a Family’ position paper
www.catholiccharities.net/www/pdf/publications/position_paper/2011_position_paper_feedingafamily.pdf

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