

Newmarket Residents Invited to May 6 Forum Organized by UNH Students to Create a Healthy Community

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DURHAM, N.H. -- How healthy is a community? Does it create opportunities for its residents to engage in physical activity? Does it promote healthy lifestyle choices?

Students in Professor Elizabeth Crepeau's occupational therapy course at the University of New Hampshire are involved in an innovative project in Newmarket to assess the activity levels and lifestyles of its residents. The information gathered is informing recommendations for programs and new activities that could be beneficial and utilized within the town.

Residents of Newmarket are invited to attend a town forum with UNH occupational therapy students to learn about the group's work and offer feedback. The meeting will be held Tuesday, May 6, at 7 p.m. in the Newmarket Town Hall Council Chamber Room.

The UNH project -- Newmarket MOVES: Creating Steps for a Healthier Lifestyle -- is spearheaded by students taking Crepeau's course, Occupation-Based Programming in the Community.

"Occupational therapists are concerned with what people do every day -- taking care of themselves and their families, working, and participating in leisure and volunteer activities at home and in the community," Crepeau says. "The course extends the field beyond the traditional realms of hospital and rehabilitation facilities. We focus on interventions at a community level, taking a preventive, healthy living approach."

Newmarket MOVES is designed for classes of students to build upon the work done by their predecessors. The inaugural group last fall conducted health-needs assessments at the Lamprey Health Clinic, town hall, recreation department, elementary school and high school. They focused on physical activity and how it relates to obesity rates.

Their findings mirrored national statistics -- an increase in those who

are overweight and a decrease in physical activity. They made several recommendations that were passed on to this year's class: begin a walking program at Lamprey Health Center, change a high school physical education policy, and create educational materials to promote the benefits of walking and the health risks associated with obesity.

Those three plans are now at various stages of development. The walking program is active, and the students secured funding from Cigna and the Lamprey Health Clinic to help fund their educational brochure, which will be distributed in Newmarket.

Another group is working on a policy paper that will suggest changing the physical education graduation requirements for all high school students. This paper will be presented to the school board at its May meeting.

As the policy stands now, says undergraduate Jodi Carrington of Westfield, Mass., varsity athletes are exempt from participation in physical education classes, leading to ineffectively small class size, which "hurts the kids who need it the most." UNH students working on the policy paper would like to see a yearlong requirement, and have garnered support from athletes on the high school teams.

"Being involved in this project is rewarding because we're starting to see the impact of our work," says grad student Meredith Przybylo of Bloomfield, Mich. "Younger people are noting the need for a healthier lifestyle, and this is the age when good habits are formed."

"We also realize that as people age, there is a huge drop in physical activity -- even for college students," says undergraduate Laurie Towler of Hampton Beach. "As occupational therapists, we want to be involved in promoting things that are going to keep people healthy throughout their lives so we can prevent disease and the need for medical assistance down the road."

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