



\$42K grant brings exercise program for disabled to Essex County

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SOUTH ORANGE — An exercise and wellness program specifically designed for mentally and physically disabled adults has come to Essex County, thanks to a \$42,813 grant from the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey.

Easter Seals of New Jersey recently announced that it received the Foundation grant to spread its “Be Well! And Thrive” program to the 50 residents who live in the organization’s 10 group homes in Essex County.

“There are components that are considered in this program that aren’t inherently considered in the general fitness industry,” Laura O’Reilly, a registered nurse and the assistant vice president of health and wellness at Easter Seals, said of the exercise program.

“Issues like considering medications that people may be on and their side effects. We consulted with a lot of experts to create a tailored program, and we’ve seen success with it so far.”

The program has been rolled out to Easter Seals homes in Monmouth and Middlesex counties, and the organization said it is relying on grant money to help spread the initiative statewide. Thanks to the Healthcare Foundation grant, the program’s first 12-week cycle – which includes exercise classes, and workshops on nutrition and hygiene – is set to run in the Easter Seals home in South Orange.

“The grant money is huge,” Kelly Bowles, the Director of Residential Services for Easter Seals, said.

“It allows us to open consumers up to new possibilities like this. And, where we’ve run the program already, we are seeing results. It’s great to be able to bring this to Essex County, too.”



Gena, a program participant at Easter Seals New Jersey’s Essex Co. Behavioral Health Residential Program, weighs herself with Laura O’Reilly. (Courtesy Easter Seals New Jersey)

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According to the Healthcare Foundation, the grant was just one of about 90 that the organization will give out this year, totaling about \$8 million.

"The mission of Easter Seals meshes beautifully with [ours], which is to improve the health and wellness of people in the greater Newark area, Marsha Atkind, Executive Director of the Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey, said.

Organizers say they have high hopes for the program in Essex County, based partially on feedback they've gotten from participants in their other active locations.

"It's a way to live a healthy life style, lose weight and give myself [the] confidence boost I need to like who I am becoming," Finita, who takes the class in Edison, said in a statement. Easter Seals declines to identify consumers by last name.

"Because of this program I have become more outgoing and can find ways to relax when I am faced with a stressful situation."

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