

Easter Seals NJ embraces health and wellness program

Ahana Dave, Editorial Intern 4:58 p.m. EDT July 23, 2015

Easter Seals New Jersey's health and wellness program teaches participants the importance of nutrition, physical activity and stress management.



(Photo: ~Courtesy of Easter Seals NJ)

Attending a health education class or picking up the latest issue of a health magazine can teach you the importance of health and wellness, but often the people who need to be informed the most about ways to live a healthy lifestyle have the least access to these resources.

A 2014 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study indicates that people with disabilities can find it more difficult to adopt a healthy lifestyle because of a lack of accessible environments that can enable exercise and a lack of resources ranging from money to social support from family and community members. The 2008 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System reports obesity rates for adults with disabilities are 58 percent higher than adults without disabilities and children with disabilities are 38 percent more likely to be at risk of obesity than children without disabilities.

In an effort to combat this issue, Easter Seals New Jersey, which provides education, outreach and advocacy for people with autism and other disabilities, launched a Be Well! & Thrive Health and Wellness Program four years ago. The 12-week program aims to help participants understand the importance of nutrition, physical activity and stress management. A recent garden dedication marked the success of the program, which now supports around 200 participants.

"Well-being and health is important, it's a value and asset," said James Richardson, health and wellness coordinator for Easter Seals New Jersey. "This population is at a higher risk of diabetes and the illnesses that follow, so this is an effort to give them the same resources and tools that you or I are privileged to."

Three days a week during their lunch hour, participants are encouraged to bring in their meal to the health and wellness classroom, Richardson said. Class begins by participants giving a review of their lunch followed by a group discussion on healthier lunch foods to increase their awareness about the alternative meal options.

"The whole point of having them bring their meal to class is that it's a discussion point and we can use really good examples or examples that aren't so good," Richardson said. "What's wonderful is a lot of peer input takes place."

Participating in the program has been an eye-opening experience for Paulette Green, 30, who has been in it since its inception.

"It's really good for me, it's taught me well," said the Piscataway native.

One of her favorite activities at the program is spending them in the garden, Green said.

"My favorite part is planting and watering the plants," she said.

Established last year, Easter Seals Well! & Thrive garden sits behind the facility on an open ground under a board that reads "A Garden is Nature's Vending Machine," a quote attributed to Howard Fridkis, a participant of the program. The garden grows four types of tomatoes, yellow squash, cucumbers, eggplants, zucchini, basil and clementine with a bed of flowers in the corner against the backdrop of trees and the buzzing of nature.

"It's very relaxing out here which is nice because it attracts participants who really have not demonstrated an interest in the class, yet they don't mind coming out here which is fine as long as they're getting the information in some capacity," Richardson said.

According to the Better Health Channel website, gardening can have many health benefits for people with disabilities by improving fitness, reducing stress levels, improved motor skills, and provides an opportunity to learn about healthy food.

The staff at the facility has been crucial in setting up the garden according to Richardson. He calls Mary Crandle, who has been employed with the organization for the past 23 years and is the garden's mentor.

"I like plants, I have a garden of my own." Crandle said. "The more I see, the bubblier it gets me. I'm happy about that. I'm happy about things growing."

By having participants go out in the garden, it helps them actually apply the knowledge they've gained in the classroom, and participants feel happier when they know they've contributed to the planting process, Crandle said.

"If you're going to teach them to eat right, then you have to help know you can grow your fruits and vegetables and you can eat them," Crandle said. "I think they feel better when they see them growing and know that they've developed them. I think they're happier to have something of their own."

The class runs for 12 weeks with a small graduation at the end of the program. The organization will also be hosting an Accessibility through Art exhibit, which will showcase the artistic contributions of people with disabilities to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the American Americans with Disabilities Act, from 5 to 9 p.m. July 29 at the Alfa Art Gallery in New Brunswick.

For more information about Easter Seals New Jersey, which provides education, outreach and advocacy for people with autism and other disabilities, and their programs, visit www.eastersealsnj.org.

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