

County challenges residents to get fit

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Bergen County may not remain in fourth place on the list of healthiest counties in New Jersey for much longer, as an initiative for healthier lives continues to grow.

The six-year-old Get Fit Bergen initiative that began in Paramus may just push the county up the health rankings list now topped by Morris, Hunterdon and Somerset counties.

Started as a way to inspire residents to lose weight and lead healthier lifestyles, Get Fit Bergen is now in 16 of the county's 70 municipalities.

This spring, participants of Get Fit Bergen 2018, part of the Community Health Improvement Partnership of Bergen County, will take fitness classes, be taught to make healthy choices and track their progress as part of the community wellness challenges.

Some of the programs focus on weight loss with private weekly weigh-ins and prizes at the end for most pounds lost. Others take a broader approach to promote healthy living and an active lifestyle, said Marla Klein, a coordinator for the Bergen County Community Health Improvement Partnership, which helps run the programs.

"We find that when the whole community gets involved, it really motivates people to make healthy choices and stick with them in a way they might not on their own," Klein said.

A few of the 16 participating communities started the wellness challenges. Englewood, Franklin Lakes, Haworth, Oradell and others will begin in early April.

In early March, Teaneck residents held an exercise kick-off event at the Richard Rodda Community Center. By the time the doors opened, a line snaked down the stairs.

"This has completely exceeded all of our expectations," said Ken Katter, the township health officer. "We expected maybe 100 people to show up, and there are more than 260 who have registered."

Now that she is in her 70s, Ellen Schwartz said she wants to make more of an effort to remain active.

"I'm starting to feel my age," she said with a laugh. "I don't necessarily want to lose weight. I just want to stay healthy."

Councilwoman Gervonn Romney Rice said she hopes the challenge will motivate the community to work together toward shared goals.

"I think it's a great way to kick off spring," she said.

"Hopefully when I'm out in the park on my walks I'll see some neighbors out there."

Organizers said they hope township will collectively lose 500 pounds by the end of the 10-week program.

"We're not prescribing one particular diet," said Linda Lohsen, the director of community outreach for Holy Name Medical Center, which is running the Teaneck challenge. "This is really more of a motivational program for people to make healthy changes. There is a lot of town spirit here."

Since the Paramus challenge began, many return each year to renew goals and stay motivated, said Danielle Fabrizio, the supervisor of health education at Valley Hospital, which coordinates the Paramus, Ridgewood and Fair Lawn programs.

"These aren't easy changes to make and I think sometimes people get overwhelmed, but a challenge can be as big or small as you make it," she said. "If you get one person to make a healthy change, it's worth it."

For more information or to register for the Get Fit Bergen 18, visit healthybergen.org or call 201-634-2693.

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Dietitian Erika Lannaman talks to residents at Teaneck's weight loss challenge.
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