

## Case Study: Woman Alive!

### Reducing Barriers to Physical Activity for Low Income Women

**Background:** Low income populations are more likely on average to live sedentary lifestyles when compared to the general population. Women make up a large proportion of the low income category and often act as the head of lone-parent families. Not only do levels of physical activity have an effect on women's physical health, including the prevention of heart disease, but widespread evidence has demonstrated that there are mental health benefits of exercise as well, such as the prevention of depression.<sup>1</sup>

**Challenge:** Low income women face a number of barriers to participation in physical activity including the affordability of programs and the costs associated with transportation to neighborhood facilities. Frequently the care-giver in the family, these women have difficulty finding and paying for services to watch their children, allowing them the free time to participate in exercise and other lifestyle programs.

**Approach:** Develop partnerships with local Hamilton organizations to provide affordable physical activity opportunities for low income women in the surrounding area.

**Solutions:** **Woman Alive!** is a free, 10-week physical activity/health education program for women on a limited income. Through classes that include aquafit, dance and aerobics, as well as guided walks and informative health seminars by health professionals, the women are able to learn healthier lifestyle behaviors, decrease their risk for chronic disease such as cardiovascular disease, and form social networks in a fun and supportive atmosphere. Most importantly, they are able to become the most positive role models for their kids.

Low income women are traditionally hard to reach and are referred to the program through public health nurses, family home visitors, women health educators, case workers, social workers, and family doctors. The barriers these women face to participation are removed by providing free programming, bus tickets, and child minding services. A pedometer loan program also encourages women to

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<sup>1</sup> Chen, Jiajian and Wayne J. Millar. "Health Effects of Physical Activity." Health Reports (Statistics Canada). Vol 11., no.1. Summer 1999.

explore walking as an accessible, inexpensive physical activity option outside of the program that is beneficial and fun for the whole family.

Public Health Services in partnership with YWCA Hamilton, Culture and Recreation, Affiliated Services for Children and Youth, Ontario Early Years Centres, and Hamilton East Kiwanis Boys' and Girls' Club offer the ten week program at three city locations. In addition to contributing their time, energy resources and materials, each partner demonstrates a commitment and compassion for the program and its participants.

**Results:** Evaluation results from 2006 program participants show not only increased physical activity levels among the women, but also increased levels of self-worth. As one participant has expressed, whose feelings echo those of many of the women in the program, "I am now actively looking for work, have made friends, feel more confident, and love life more than I have in three years. I recommend the program to anyone who needs to feel alive again."

***OHHP-Taking Action for Healthy Living*** is a vehicle for collaborative, primary prevention efforts in Ontario Communities.