

# GRANT-FUNDED PROGRAM HELPS YOUTHS FIGHT OBESITY

## the numbers

For ages 5 to 11, the percentage of overweight kids in Dare County is 25.3 percent, which exceeds the 23.2 percent statewide.

Between ages 12 and 18, the weight gap grows wider: 31.2 percent for Dare County versus 27.5 percent for the state.

By Catherine Kozak  
The Virginian-Pilot

Even a recreational haven like Dare County has not escaped the challenge of overweight children.

"Everybody thinks, 'We're at the beach,'" said Stephanie Bowers, project coordinator of the Dare County Childhood Obesity Prevention Program. "Our kids are outside. They're active."

Despite that perception, Dare's young people, on average, are heavier than their peers statewide. As it is, North Carolina has the fifth-highest rate of childhood obesity in the nation.

Health officials warn that excess weight in children increases their risk of diabetes and high blood pressure. Heavy children are also more likely to become obese adults, who are at higher risk for heart disease and strokes.

Dare County was one of five counties in the state to be awarded funding for an obesity-prevention demonstration project. A \$400,000 state grant was awarded to the county Department of Public Health in late 2008.

The hope is that a strong community effort will lead to extended funding when the current grant expires in May.

"The goal of this program is to make the healthy behaviors and lifestyle fun," Bowers said. The hope is also to make the changes a lifelong good habit.

The older a Dare child gets, the more likely he or she is to be overweight, according to a state study. For ages 5 to 11, the percentage of overweight children in the county, 25.3 percent, exceeds the number statewide, 23.2 percent.

Between ages 12 and 18, the weight gap grows wider, 31.2 percent for the county versus 27.5 for the state.

Bowers said that the project includes working with schools, day care centers and health care providers and at a church and recreational facilities to expand the reach of the program.

Through a partnership with the Outer Banks Scenic Byway Committee, a 1.5-mile bicycle/pedestrian pathway will be constructed on Buxton Back Road, which runs behind N.C. 12 from the entrance to the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse to Cape Hatteras Secondary School of Coastal Studies.

About 142 children live within two miles of the school.

"There's no extended shoulder there," Bowers said. "It's extremely dangerous."

Not only will the path make it safer for children to bike or walk - it's close to a child care center and the elementary school - the project, she said,

## OBESITY | *Eating well, staying active are the messages*

Continued from Page 1

had already been planned. The 500-foot portion funded by the Dare program will have to be completed before the grant expires at the end of May.

There is also a marketing campaign to educate the community. "Eat Smart, Move More" public service messages that encourage healthy lifestyles, began running on cable television in December, and on radio in February. They will be seen in movie theaters starting in March.

Childhood obesity-prevention training has been provided for family health care providers, child care providers and physical education teachers.

At the Outer Banks Family YMCA in Nags Head, parents as well as students take part in a nutritional and exercise program called "Energize-Dare!" The 12-week class required a physician referral and targeted children who are at risk for, or have, type 2 diabetes.

Larry Porter, the Y's executive director, said 18 young people have signed up for the three-day-a-week program.

Porter said that youths seem to most enjoy the interactive activities - like "Dance, Dance Revolution," a computerized pad an individual dances on - that they can do with their friends in the facility's interactive zone.

"There's just so many obstacles out there that limit activity," Porter said. "We're just happy to be in the position to help them."

The program has been well worth the drive from her East Lake home, said Pam Hughes, whose high school son is participating.

"I'm hoping ... that it will help us to be more active, but also teach us the right things to eat," she said.

Hughes said that her family now eats more fruits and vegetables with their meals, and she and her son are enjoying the exercise classes at the Y.

"I think we're giving up more time than anything," she said. "It's hard - but it's well worth it."

"We're hoping that after 12 weeks, we'll be able to keep it up. I think it's a great thing."