
In Business Rockford Review

CHIP Out a New Image for Rockford

Mary George, Editor*

WHAT IMAGE COMES to mind when you hear the phrase "Healthiest city in the nation"? Do you see physically fit people jogging through a pristine park? How about senior citizens looking years younger than their actual age? Maybe workplaces with an exercise room onsite?

New Image for Rockford?

Rockford has been looking for a new image and Peter Vedro, executive consultant for CHIP (Coronary Health Improvement Project), just might have the answer. Currently, there's no place in this country where a coordinated effort to improve the health of the community through a change in lifestyle has been initiated. That may soon change. Rockford may emerge as the impetus of this effort. Vedro and CHIP's sponsor, SwedishAmerican Center for Complementary Medicine, have set their sights on not only making Rockford the healthiest city in the country, but also in creating a template that can be reproduced in cities nationwide.

Growing Alliance

For the last three years in Rockford, a broadening alliance has grown between healthcare professionals, corporations, the faith-based community, the school system, local restaurants and food providers, and local government in support of the implementation of CHIP. During that time, more than 4,500 local residents have graduated from CHIP, and several local corporations have embraced the program for their workforce.

State Research Funds

The CHIP program was founded 15 years ago by Dr. Hans Diehl, a heart researcher, as a way to normalize and reverse some diseases through a low-fat, mainly plant-based diet, coupled with regular exercise. He chose to make Rockford the CHIP model because of the reception

the program received from local physicians and community leaders.

The impact of CHIP on Rockford has been impressive enough to garner a \$750,000 State of Illinois "Excellence in Academic Medicine" grant for the program through SwedishAmerican Health System. The grant will fund a scientific measurement of the medical and economic impact of simple lifestyle changes on chronic diseases like diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, certain types of cancer, and those affecting the heart.

"One of the reasons we decided to do this particular study has to do with validating the research that has already been published," the Center's administrator Cathy Cooper-Keith said. "This study, however, is both controlled and random and represents the gold standard in testing the previously observed and published improvements."

This randomized clinical study will enroll 400 participants to take part in one of the sessions in either March, or in October 2003. Because this study is randomized, participants may not be able to choose the session they may want to attend. All 400 participants will be pre-tested in March at the beginning of the program, and then again at the end of the program in April. Those who were assigned to the control group will have the full CHIP program the following October with before and after data collected again.

Marketing Rockford as "Model City of Health"

"It is the mix of education program, the self-empowerment, and the community aspect that can make the difference in people's lives," Vedro said. "If you can order healthy meals at a restaurant, easily purchase healthy food at the grocery store, and know that you are not going it alone, chances are better that you will stay on the program."

If, at the completion of the one-year study, the scientific evidence supports what has been shown to be true in other studies, then Vedro believes he will have what he needs to aggressively market the program to other communities. "When that happens, those communities will come to Rockford and we will take them around the city so that they can experience what we have created here," Vedro said. "It would put Rockford in a very good light."

And putting a positive spin on Rockford is good for business. "Corporations are facing an increase in the cost of medical care at twice the inflation rate," said Roger Greenlaw, MD,

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Clinical Professor of Medicine at the University of Illinois, College of Medicine at Rockford, who was instrumental in bringing CHIP to Rockford. “The solution of medicine and surgery is not, at least by itself, the best option for the corporation, the patient, or the third party payer. The largest percent of a company’s medical budget is spent on treating disease after it occurs, with only 3% spent on preventative measures.”

If the Rockford community embraces CHIP and a healthier environment is created, that fact can be used to market Rockford in a new light.

“If we can demonstrate that, on average, Rockford businesses have lower healthcare costs and that Rockford is a great place to live because of the healthier lifestyle of its residents, then it may attract new businesses here,” Greenlaw said.

CHIP at the Worksite

Several local companies have already embraced the CHIP program. At least one of the companies, Rockford Products, has been pleased enough from the results of CHIP that they have not only continued offering the training, but they are taking it to the next level.

“We have started our own medical clinic which brings two physicians onto our premises,” said Jerry Norquist, manager of training and development at Rockford Products. “We think that this will be a huge impetus for associates who use the physicians and are on the CHIP program.”

Norquist hopes to start a CHIP session co-led by CHIP facilitators and physicians. “I am a facilitator, but I am not trained to answer medical questions,” he noted. “I think the addition of physicians to the sessions will be beneficial.”

Rockford Products initially got involved with CHIP at the urging of company president, Ray Wood, who, after completing the program, felt that in light of rising healthcare costs, it was something that the company could do to be proactive.

“We are also concerned about the well-being of our associates, who are the company’s shareholders and owners, and their quality of life now and in the future,” said Dick Mowris, vice-president of administration.

Mowris does not have any hard evidence of cost-savings to Rockford Products from CHIP, but he believes the clinical improvement in many high-risk employees is strong enough

to keep the program alive. “For the folks that truly practice the CHIP lifestyle, it has been a life-changing event,” Mowris surmised. “I know that there are a couple of people who were high-risk for heart attacks and now they are symptom-free. I cannot predict whether they would have had a heart attack or bypass surgery if they hadn’t embraced the CHIP lifestyle, but if they had, it would have been tragic and costly.”

Changing Lifestyles

Norquist does know, from personal experience, that the CHIP lifestyle has enabled him to get off some medications and reduce others. “What we need to do, now, is provide a support group to help people stay on the program,” he said. “We have people who are zealots down to those who have stopped the program. We need to keep people on the program, and that is where the community involvement comes in.”

To make a difference in the health of Americans, the CHIP program has an uphill battle ahead of it. Trillions of dollars are being spent annually to move people to make unhealthy food choices, according to Vedro. “We have to overcome the old habits and inertia Americans exhibit when they are prompted to change their diet and lifestyle,” he continued. People are so used to a quick fix, but that won’t hold for the long run.”

According for the Center for Eating Disorders, about 95% of people who lose weight by dieting regain the lost weight. On the other hand, a master’s thesis written at Western Michigan University revealed that 80% of CHIP participants use 80% of the CHIP recommendations 80% of the time. The study looked at graduates who had finished the CHIP program one to two years prior.

“This was not a long-range study,” Vedro conceded. “But as we continue to gather information, I know that it will show that CHIP has a high retention rate.”

The greatest metaphor about CHIP in Rockford, according to Vedro, is that the CHIP office is located in the former Bishop Cafeteria. “The food that was served there had the potential to clog people’s arteries. But now, having been remodeled to be the headquarters of the Center for Complementary Medicine, we are now involved in cleaning out those arteries,” Vedro quipped.

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