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Kaiser Permanente awards \$1 million grant to improve health in Riverside's Eastside

Residents of Riverside's Eastside neighborhood are getting some help as they battle many of the same health issues – poor eating habits and a lack of physical activity -- that plague many other communities.

Over the next several years, Riverside County health officials will be using a \$1 million grant from Kaiser Permanente to promote healthy eating and active living in the Riverside community of 17,500 residents. The three-year HEAL (Healthy Eating Active Living) Zone grant is one of six awarded by Kaiser throughout Southern California.

“The goal is to promote a lifestyle change that will make a difference to Eastside residents,” said Susan Harrington, director of the Riverside County Department of Public Health, which was awarded the grant on behalf of the Riverside County Health Coalition. “It is not just a physical change in the environment, but a change in the mindset that makes people consider their health when selecting a snack, buying some groceries or choosing whether to walk to the store or park instead of taking a vehicle.”

According to health officials, 58 percent of adults and 24 percent of Eastside teens are considered overweight or obese. Like other Riverside County residents, many of those living in the Eastside do not walk for transportation, leisure or exercise.

The goal of the program is to improve eating habits of both adults and children by providing residents healthier options, including the creation of a farmer's market, and educating them about the benefits of healthy foods. Improvements could also be made at local park sites to make them more attractive to residents so they could be more physically active.

Over the next few months, officials will be meeting with Eastside residents to get their input. Some Eastside residents have already been involved in the planning through the health coalition, which is made up of public agencies, private foundations and community groups working together to improve health.

In addition to Riverside, Kaiser Permanente selected five other Southern California communities to receive \$1 million HEAL Zone grants: Ontario in San Bernardino County, Anaheim in Orange County, Long Beach in Los Angeles County, Lemon Grove in San Diego County, Ventura in Ventura County. In addition to the six HEAL Zone awards, Kaiser Permanente will dedicate additional funding for technical and evaluation support as well as other Southern California place-based community investments over the next three years.

The Healthy Eating Active Living program started in 2004 as a way to address obesity and other health related conditions.

“Since the inception of our HEAL program we saw increased physical activity, greater availability of healthy food in corner stores, improvement of our local parks and creation of safe walkways. We also learned that going forward, we could make a greater impact by concentrating our efforts in smaller, more targeted areas,” said Benjamin Chu, MD, MPH, MACP, group president for Kaiser Permanente Southern California and Kaiser Permanente Hawaii. “For Kaiser Permanente, the HEAL Zones are much more than just funding. They are an extension of the work in our medical centers, and our commitment to helping create healthy individuals and healthy communities.”