

Walk Across Arizona

Community Fitness Program

By Joanne Littlefield

Photo courtesy of Green Valley News & Sun



Comfortable shoes, sunscreen and a bottle of water are all you need to start a walking program.

Despite what the name may imply, you won't see bands of people linked arm-in-arm, plodding across the desert, over mountain ranges and along the Colorado River. Rather, "Walk Across Arizona" has become a way for local community members to learn more about their neighbors while participating in a healthy alternative to the life of a couch potato.

It all began in Green Valley, Ariz., where many retirees from colder climates spend the winter. Since their permanent residences are somewhere else, the retirees may often feel disassociated from the community they live in only temporarily, according to a 1998 study compiled by the Health and Human Services Committee (HHSC) of the Green Valley Community Coordinating Council.

The initial goal was to design an activity that would build community, says Pima County Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Agent Linda Block. "They wanted first of all to build community in getting the message across that 'Green Valley is my home'." The second goal—promoting a healthy lifestyle—works hand-in-hand with a need to maximize the retirees' independence

by encouraging them to stay as active as possible. Some children from the Sahuarita area participated the first year. After looking at different programs in the country, the task force on Promoting a Healthy Lifestyle, part of the HHSC, came up with "Walk Across Arizona," a 16-week walking program, in 2001. Participants register for the program and are then placed on a team.

"The teams may originate in the homeowners' association, or at a worksite or a club," Block says. "They track their miles and report them each week to their team captain who in turn reports them to the central gathering place for information." This varies with the group, and can include the Cooperative Extension office, or Green Valley Recreation.

In the first year of the campaign, 34 teams of 10 individuals from Green Valley and one from Tucson walked 48,872 miles with 329 registered participants; the average number of days walked by participants increased from 4.1 at entry to 4.6 upon exit, and an average of 11.4 miles per person and 91.2 miles per team were walked per week.

The second year the program expanded to 37 teams, walked 62,054 miles, with a total of six counties represented. Participants included a range of ages and lifestyles, from retirees, homeowner associations, cooperative extension staff. They walked in neighborhoods, schools, wilderness trails, anything that was convenient to them. Some did mall walking, some folks who couldn't get out used walking videos to record their miles. Fifty-one percent of the walkers in the second year reported at the end of the 16-week walking program that they had increased energy, while another 43 percent reported feeling less stressed. Teams walked an average 4.6 days per week and averaged 48.5 minutes of walking per day.

Each program includes a kick-off phase, a motivational program, the 16 weeks of group walking, and a wrap celebration. When the official program ends, participants are encouraged to walk on their own, and make it part of their lifestyle.

"The whole idea of having it for 16 weeks is that when it ends, people will continue walking or some form of physical activity," Block says.

The third year of the campaign started in early-November 2003 with 47 teams, including 15 teams of 150 miners at Phelps Dodge, Sierrita, Inc., registered in Pima County. As of December 31, 2003, 460 individuals reported 38,455 miles walked in Pima County.

At one retirement community in Green Valley, the team captain is a 90-year-old woman with a team member 93 years of age, the oldest participant in the program. At the

same retirement community, 82-year-old identical twin sisters walk an average 16 miles per week and lead walking excursions around the retirement campus three mornings per week.

“We love to exercise, but it isn’t to try to live to be 100,” they say. “We just want good quality of life.”

Cooperative Extension teams in Maricopa and Yuma started in December 2003 and January 2004, respectively.

“Statewide we have about 525 people enrolled in the 2003-2004 campaign,” Block says. “Because we have different weather conditions in different areas of the state, we’ve designed the 16-week program to be scheduled by different counties to fit their climates. For example, Flagstaff may want to participate in the summer rather than the

winter.” Another program developed by the Cooperative Extension Community Health Advancement Partnerships (CHAPS) program is a physical activity program for seniors.

“It’s a nine-week curriculum where we go into their congregate meal sites, introduce the concept of physical activity and implement the program,” Block says. Participants are given a pre- and post-test to discern their activity level. “It is our hope that these individuals too will form walking clubs to continue to stay physically active.”

The counties participating in 2003 included Apache, Cochise, Santa Cruz, Maricopa, Yuma and Pima. In 2004, Cochise, Maricopa, Yuma and Pima counties are involved. ☒

For more information or to participate, contact: Linda Block, (520) 626-5161, lblock@ag.arizona.edu.
Examples of activities are located at msg.calsnet.arizona.edu/walkacrossaz/.