

## REACHing everyone is goal of Stockton activist

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STOCKTON — Changing the health culture of an entire community the size and diversity of Stockton undoubtedly will take time — a whole generation, Bobby Bivens says.

On Wednesday, Bivens, longtime president of Stockton's NAACP civil rights organization, signed a community-driven policy formalizing his group's approach to improving health through such steps as serving more nutritious food at gatherings, making water the drink of choice instead of sugar-sweetened beverages, and promoting breastfeeding for newborns and infants.

One simple change the community soon could see is the addition of a 10-minute exercise break after every hour of a public meeting. It could happen as soon as the end of the year, according to LaCresia Hawkins.

"Hopefully for the City Council when they have these marathon meetings, they will break and take a physical activity break. We do have the support of Mayor Anthony Silva and a majority of the council and city manager," said Hawkins, project coordinator for REACH San Joaquin.

REACH is an acronym for Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health and is a project of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy and the Stockton Branch of the NAACP. Its six-figure funding for the past eight months of the policy development phase came from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and its work is being overseen by the University of California, Los Angeles.

There are 14 similar projects across the United States. Stockton was selected, according to Hawkins, because of its high incidence of diabetes and the excessive consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages among youth combined with a lack of funding opportunities to make changes.

“Each project was to select a minority population to focus on, and the African American community of San Joaquin County was selected. With Stockton having the highest concentration of African Americans, the city of Stockton was selected, and we decided we wanted to work with community-based and faith-based organizations,” Hawkins said.

“We basically looked at organizations that worked with a good number of people in the African-American community. We held several trainings throughout the year, and the eight-month project ended Aug. 29. Now we are writing our final report,” she said.

That final report will summarize the REACH Project’s efforts and include follow up from the churches and other organizations, such as the city, Health Plan of San Joaquin, First 5 and Healings in Motion. It will also help local project leaders obtain a second round of funding covering a three-year effort focusing on implementation, now that policies have been developed and adopted.

Hawkins also anticipates expanding the effort to a greater number of churches and community organizations.

“This has definitely made a dent. When you have 30 policies in place from 14 different organizations, this is the start. And now other faith communities have heard about it and are showing interest. In October, we are scheduled to start a second phase and will bring in more organizations and churches,” she said.

Hawkins said the interest is high because “people really want to be healthy. Nobody wants to be sick, but there are certain things that happen because of ignorance and lack of access” to such basic things as fresh fruits and vegetables, safe streets and parks for activities, and affordable health care.

The Rev. Amelia Adams, pastor at The Open Door House of Prayer Ministries for 32 years and one of the most active participants working with Stockton’s REACH Project, said her church has had an active health ministry for the past 18 years.

For eight of those years, the central Stockton church has held a Health Fitness Sunday once every quarter, asking congregants to come dressed appropriately to participate in exercises. Demonstrations are provided, and seniors are especially

encouraged to participate.

“We were doing a lot of other things but we had not developed policy around what we were doing. This is where this project has really helped us. We have alternatives: Instead of fried chicken, there is baked chicken or broiled chicken. We also have alternatives to dessert such as fruit and healthy snacks for the various activities that we have,” Adams said.

The project’s outreach specialist, Christina Peoples, calls it “healthy by default. If we put policies in place, you would have no choice but to be healthy because that is the policy around you.”

Bivens agreed.

“It takes a generation, realistically, to make things happen in this community, to change processes and practices,” he said. “We hope we won’t lose another generation. The next generation will be healthier.”

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