

# Community FITNESS CHALLENGES

Compel residents to participate and *feel great*

By *Christine Schaffran*

**Looking for the ingredients to host** a successful fitness challenge?

Combine ease of participation with a little friendly competition, fold in a partnership with a local medical facility, and add a dash of marketing. For good measure—sprinkle with incentives and a mayor or city manager in sweat pants and a pair of tennis shoes—and voila you have a perfectly prepared program that serves the entire community.

Whether it's inspiration from "The Biggest Loser" or a plea from local medical centers to encourage physical activity, fitness challenges are gaining in popularity. And with an obesity epidemic running rampant in the country, Warrenville, Ill., Mayor David Brummel says he is proud to be his community's "workout" buddy.

"It's always a challenge to maintain weight and fitness," Brummel explains. "The idea is just to get as many people as possible up and moving."

Like others, Brummel started a fitness challenge in his community by encouraging participants to spend a minimum of 150 minutes per week doing some type of physical activity to receive a T-shirt at the end of the eight weeks. He says 261 people signed up.

"Try to find something that fits the identity of the community," Brummel offers as a tip for involvement. "The majority of these people are not regular exercisers, so make it easy to participate."

Similar challenges in other communities also invite residents to face off against mayors, city managers, council members, and local "celebrities."

"To me, it's all about getting up, working hard, and staying active," says 63-year-old Dan Snarr, the mayor of Murray, Utah. "I want to inspire residents to do the same."

Snarr competed against seven other area mayors, two councilmen, one city manager, and one city attorney in a 100-day fitness challenge sponsored by Intermountain Medical Center. The Salt Lake City-based healthcare system offered counseling, weigh-ins, stress tests, and other diagnostics to participants.



# Secrets For SUCCESS

- Involve city officials and local “celebrities.” The name recognition will hopefully encourage others to participate.
- Partner with local medical facilities. Professionals can offer the necessary tools to live a healthy lifestyle.
- Make it fun. Create themes that change from year to year, and make it easy to participate.
- Give the program a time limit. Eight weeks seems to be the cutoff. If it’s too long, people will become bored or frustrated. Consider offering a program in the winter so people are not distracted by other activities.
- Use tools such as direct mailing, ads in local newspapers and community directories, and Facebook posts to get residents revved up.
- Sweeten the pot with incentives. Offer discounts on memberships to the community rec center (50 percent off during enrollment for the fitness challenge). Giveaways such as T-shirts, water bottles, and pedometers all can be motives to participate.
- Award prizes. Ask local eateries and entertainment venues to donate gift cards for the winner or winners. Looking for prizes that don’t cost a dime? Give away a free yearlong membership to the grand-prize winner.

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In Brunswick, Ohio, the parks and recreation department took the challenge a step further. In addition to partnering with Southwest General Medical Center to offer health screenings, the program also included a lecture series for participants to learn more about nutrition, exercise, and the importance of overall health.

Brunswick Parks and Recreation Director John Piepsny says marketing

is a key in creating buzz and getting people interested.

Piepsny says stressing that the program is about overall healthy living is more important to participants than losing weight.

"People are looking for an experience. They don't want to just lift weights," he explains. "And they want it to be fun."

One cautionary detail he shares

from the early days when the city offered another rendition of the program is that women do not want to reveal their weight. Therefore, the program transformed from a weight-loss challenge to an overall health-and-wellness competition.

Since 2004, the program has been through various renditions that involved everything from counting the number of steps participants took to awarding points based on the rigor of an activity. Another version invited businesses to face off, and still yet to come is putting school-aged children to the test.

Snarr says regardless of the activity, it's important for people to get up and move, and sometimes they may need a little motivation from their neighbors and friends.

"Mental fitness requires physical fitness to get the endorphins going," he asserts. "It's really simple. It's just a matter of people saying 'I can do it' and sticking to it." **PRB**

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