

Central Sierra Steps Towards Fitness

SUMMARY

The CalFresh Healthy Living UCCE Central Sierra team hosted *Step It Up*, a virtual version of a worksite wellness competition for educators and school communities. During the early stages of the shelter in place orders issued during the COVID-19 pandemic, the four week step counting challenge provided participants a safe and free way to stay active and enjoy camaraderie from a distance. With over 70 participants from two counties, *Step It Up* can provide a model for future physical activity opportunities.

BACKGROUND

In rural Tuolumne County and surrounding Central Sierra counties, opportunities for free physical activity are not accessible to all. Not all neighborhoods have sidewalks, there are wide swaths of open space between neighborhoods, and most folks do not rely on walking as a major mode of transportation. When California received shelter-in-place orders in March 2020, the rural nature of the area became an opportunity to stay active while remaining socially distant. Rural residents were uniquely positioned to still have safe access to open spaces while following safety practices for COVID-19 prevention.

Many schools eligible for CFHL nutrition education in the Central Sierra also lack worksite wellness support for their staff. Over the past four years, CFHL UCCE in Tuolumne County has hosted *Step It Up*, a walking competition aimed at school staff to both role model healthy behaviors for their students and encourage staff wellness. Teachers and coaches can have an influence on a child's attitude towards physical activity.

SOLUTION

When shelter-in-place orders were issued, CFHL UCCE pivoted to host a virtual *Step It Up* challenge open to the Central Sierra counties. Using established lines of communication with eligible sites, participants from El Dorado and Tuolumne counties hiked, rolled, jogged, and walked "together." The competition started on May 20, 2020 and ran for the next four weeks, including six teams and 73 participants who tracked their steps or miles and entered them weekly. Encouraging newsletters were sent weekly highlighting team progress, fun local outdoor activities, and new recipes to try.



Weekly themes were set up to encourage small changes throughout the challenge, and included setting a SMART goal, exercising for improved mental health outcomes, and how to

sustain new habits. Participants were also provided with expert guidance from the UC ANR Nutrition Policy Institute on how to safely engage in outdoor activities during COVID-19.

OUTCOME

In total, 73 participants walked 8,224 miles over the course of the challenge. Participants expressed they enjoyed the weekly emails and camaraderie with their team. Some are asking for a twice annual competition this school year!

Because of the quick turn-around time between shelter-in-place orders and the rollout of a virtual *Step It Up* Challenge, there are several possibilities to grow the challenge this next year:

- Implementing a pre/post evaluation to gauge physical activity levels before, during, and after the challenge.
- Adding a direct education component with live virtual classes.
- Offering a "family challenge" version with incentives to match school PA standards for school staff and their entire families.

"Our school team really enjoyed it and we all agree that it gave us something to keep our minds occupied during the craziest of times."

-Participant, Belleview Elementary

9/24/2020 For more information or to get involved, contact Katie Johnson, Nutrition Family and Consumer Sciences Advisor for the University of California Cooperative Extension in the Central Sierra at ckrjohnson@ucanr.edu