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Leadership effort tackles Valley health issues

By Barbara Anderson / The Fresno Bee

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When it comes to judging a community's health, the San Joaquin Valley all too often flunks the test. Rates for everything from asthma to overweight children are among the highest in the state.

But for the past year, a group of health educators, business owners, local government officials and community leaders has had a chance to work on solutions to health problems in the Valley.

Under the Central Valley Health Policy Institute's Leadership Program, 30 people tackled such issues as health disparities, the uninsured, a lack of doctors and access to health resources.

This month, the institute is taking applications from people who want to participate in the leadership program to begin May 12. Applications are due by March 31. Information is available at (559) 228-2150 or online at www.csufresno.edu/ccchhs/HPI.

Felicia Greer, an assistant professor of kinesiology at California State University Fresno, participated in the leadership program just ending.

Her interest is Type 2 diabetes, which is becoming rampant among children because of childhood obesity. The percentage of obese adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 in the Valley reached 15.2% in 2003. That compares with 12.4% of teens statewide.

One of the other participants interested in diabetes was Dr. Adriana Padilla, associate clinical professor and director of medical student education at the University of California, San Francisco-Fresno Medical Education program.

Greer and Padilla belonged to a group that focused on diabetes for its year-long leadership project.

The leadership program allows participants to "team up with people who are interested in a certain particular health issue," Greer says.

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The diabetes group decided doctors need a list of nutrition, weight-loss and physical education programs available to help diabetics manage their disease or to help prevent those at risk from developing diabetes.

Padilla says it's difficult referring adolescents or adults at risk of diabetes to weight loss or physical fitness programs. "My struggle is from a health insurance perspective," she says. "Education isn't necessarily covered unless you have a diagnosis of diabetes."

The diabetes resource list would be "like a cheat sheet for doctors to refer to when they're dealing with a diabetic patient," Greer says.

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