

Everyone Swims: Changing policies to increase access to swimming lessons and water recreation

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Background/Introduction

Swimming is a lifetime skill, provides opportunities to be active, opens a door to countless opportunities for water recreation, and is recommended for people with chronic conditions and obesity. It is also a key skill in preventing drowning. Drowning is the second leading cause of unintentional injury death among children in the United States, Washington State and King County. The Wall Street Journal reports that 70% of African-American children and 58% of Hispanic children have little or no swimming ability compared to 40% of Caucasian children (2010).

The goal of the Everyone Swims project is to leverage policy change to improve water recreation access for those at higher risk for obesity and health disparities. It focuses on low income and culturally diverse children, youth and families throughout King County with issues accessing swimming and swim lessons, water recreation and boating programs for exercise like rowing or kayaking. Nineteen percent of the King County population and up to 46% in the focused communities of this project are living at 200% below the federal poverty level. Creating linkages between obesity prevention and injury prevention is critically important to addressing health status on multiple levels. Swimming for exercise and drowning prevention is a great example of how healthy lifestyle and injury prevention can share similar goals.

Project Objectives:

- Change parks and recreation policies for scholarship eligibility. Policy changes that will streamline this process include simpler guidelines, information in multiple languages and scholarships for multiple people in one family
- Develop referral mechanisms from community health clinics to swimming pools and water recreation programs
- Change policies and practices in community clinics to include screening at the five and six year old well child check for swimming ability
- Develop a system to address barriers to swimming and water recreation and enhance access. We will focus on free swim lessons, gender-specific swimming, and water recreation for youth or adults who are obese

Methods/Implementation

Almost twenty pool, water recreation and community health clinic partners are working together to develop and implement policy and system changes. A needs assessment with project partners and with culturally diverse families identified barriers and opportunities and helped in developing and prioritizing system and policy changes (1,2). We will share the needs assessment findings, model policies and initial progress by pools and clinics in pursuing policy and system changes. This project will be evaluated by the actual changes that are made. For example, one community health clinic has added swim screening to the electronic medical record which systematically ensures that the question be asked and addressed.

Conclusion

We are focusing on policy and system changes to improve water recreation and swimming access that can be achieved and maintained. The partnership with multiple community health clinics and pools helps ensure that the proposed work addresses key barriers for families and is achievable.

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References

- (1) Everyone Swims Focus Group Summary <http://www.seattlechildrens.org/ppt/CPW-Everyone-Swims-final-focus-group-summary.ppt>
- (2) Everyone Swims Policy Priority List. <http://www.seattlechildrens.org/doc/policy-and-systems-changes-list-everyone-swims.doc>

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