In Hagerstown’s Fairgrounds Park, participants start out on a Saturday morning FitWalk, one of the programs offered through HEAL (Healthy Eating and Active Lifestyles) of Washington County.

Building Healthy Communities

Local Organizations Encourage Healthy Lifestyles, Activities and Eating Habits to Win the Battle Against Obesity

TRICIA ROWLAND SAYS SHE’S been overweight all of her adult life. She’s made weight loss attempts and had plans to make key lifestyle changes but, like many people, excuses always seemed to get in the way. She had been participating in group FitWalks sponsored by HEAL (Healthy Eating and Active Lifestyles) of Washington County and wanted to progress to its 10,000 Steps program, but a torn meniscus in her knee took her out of the swing of things. Then, a trip to the hospital because she thought she was having a heart attack provided the wake-up call she needed.

“When I got out of the hospital, I immediately signed up for the program. No excuses after that,” Tricia says. Though she
started walking with a cane and could only do seven to eight minutes at a time before needing a rest. "I've made great strides — no pun intended," she says. Family and friends have noticed a pep in her walk, "and I feel it. Just getting up and moving has made me feel so much better."

Tricia and other area residents are benefitting from a growing movement of community organizations and motivated city leaders who want to address health and wellness locally. Obesity and overweight are not just "image" concerns. The extra pounds resulting from poor diet and inactivity trigger a host of other medical conditions, including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, stroke and high blood pressure — all growing concerns throughout the nation. Locally, nonprofits like HEAL and the Mercersburg (Pa.) Area Council for Wellness (MACWell), both of which have partnered with community organizations and leaders, are promoting education, nutrition and physical activity to improve the health and quality of life of residents.

**HEALing a Community**

In his practice with Capital Women's Care in Hagerstown, Dr. Mitesh Kothari saw firsthand the problem and impact of obesity in Washington County. "I felt like something had to happen for these patients," Dr. Kothari says. "I would tell them their BMI was elevated. I would tell them about the risks. I would tell them that they wouldn't live as long and those sorts of things, and then I would have nothing to offer them because (patients without the right means) can't afford a personal trainer, can't afford nutrition advice." He discovered he had nowhere to send these patients for ongoing support and advice.

So he reached out — to fitness trainers like Dave Ruff of Ruff Fitness and Chad Smith; to the Washington County Health Department; to Washington County Public Schools' officials; to Meritus Health — and began laying the foundation for what became HEAL in late 2012. "It's been a great group of people that really are single-minded to make this community more healthy."

Dr. Kothari and his board aimed to adapt the most successful programs from other parts of the country and implement them here. And they looked for programs that would be accessible to any fitness level and help participants motivate each other as part of a group. "We wanted something that's feasible, something that's appealing to someone who wants to jump-start their physical fitness," says HEAL Executive Director Jenny Fleming, who joined the organization in 2013. "Not everyone has either the resources or the desire to join a gym, but there are (other) ways to get physical activity."

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Healthy Eating Adventure Program Coordinator Elizabeth Grant (top, L–R), Kathy Lehman, Cindy Warnement and Nate Lehman fill their plates at Chambersburg's monthly potluck at Wilson College, where participants bring dishes like mixed veggies and grains (middle) or healthy carrot cake (above).
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HEAL Executive Director Jenny Fleming discusses the day’s FitWalk course with trainer Chad Smith, one of the trainers who volunteer to lead the exercise.

A HEALTHY HUB

HEAL found an eager partner in the City of Hagerstown, which has been pursuing initiatives to help boost community health. In addition to hosting HEAL FitWalks and installing fitness equipment at Fairgrounds Park, the city’s parks and recreation department launched the Hub City 100-Miler this year. “Considering the high obesity rate in the City of Hagerstown, we’d like to have more programs that focus on fitness and just getting people moving and getting people healthy,” says Amy Riley, recreation coordinator with the City of Hagerstown.

The 100-Miler was adapted from a similar program in another city. Participants were challenged to complete one mile a day for 100 days, with the city sending email newsletters offering tips and suggestions for how to incorporate city facilities and parks in fitness routines. With 658 registered participants, “We were blown away,” Amy says. “Obviously there is a need for programs like this, and we’d like to continue it next year.”

Hagerstown resident and city employee Ryan Grove saw the 100-Miler as a way to challenge himself to lose 30 pounds in time for his 30th birthday in April. He began running and set a goal of 20 miles a week. A foot injury stopped him just short of his 30-pound goal, but the fitness challenge has become a permanent lifestyle change. “I wanted to make sure this was something that changed in me. It became a part of who I am,” Ryan says. The Hub City 100-Miler also gave Williamsport resident Veronica Zabala the motivation she needed to keep moving during the winter months. “It helped me get back on track during the winter,” Veronica says. “And it
helped me feel more energized.” She was so excited that she and her cousins registered for a 5K in Florida’s Disney World in February.

The city will continue to encourage healthy activities by helping to promote the Economic Development Office’s free yoga sessions in University Plaza, hosting bird walks, and sponsoring fitness swims and Dive-In Movie Nights at Potterfield Pool this summer. Of course, Hagerstown’s nearly 20 miles bike paths promote fitness and activity as well. “We need people to be more active, and this encourages more active lifestyles,” says Hagerstown City Engineer Rodney Tissue. Like HEAL, the City of Hagerstown is looking to grow programs to meet community needs. “The emphasis for us this year is to talk to these audiences we’re building with programs like the Hub City 100-Miler and ask them what they’d like to see next,” Amy says.

ADVENTURES IN EATING

Like Dr. Kothari, Dr. Elizabeth George of Mercersburg Family Care in Franklin County, Pa., faced a similar question of how to help patients live healthier lifestyles, and that led her to create the Mercersburg Area Council for Wellness, or MACWell. “It literally started because one day, I was in my office and there was a 10 year old there, and he was 150 pounds,” Dr. George recalls. “And I looked at him, and I said to myself, how did this happen?” She gathered other healthcare providers and school officials to start looking at what needed to shift in the community to have an impact.

Part of the answer came in the form of a book by a Mercersburg Academy alumni: Rip Esselstyn’s “The Engine 2 Diet: The Texas Firefighter’s 28-day Save-Your-Life Plan that Lowers Cholesterol and Burns Away the Pounds.” In 2012 Dr. George asked Rip to help create a 28-day program for a community, beginning with a small group who tried out the whole-foods, plant-based diet. “Within a week, each one of us was convinced that this was remarkable — how different you feel in a week, how easy it is to prepare the food, how much you shift your palate,” she says.

That has become MACWell’s free Healthy Eating Adventure program, which combines “The Engine 2 Diet” with medical background provided by Rip’s father, Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn Jr., and potluck gatherings where participants can try new recipes. “At the potlucks, participants are seeing all the different things that people can and do make, and how they taste and what the textures are,” says Elizabeth Grant, Healthy Eating Adventure program manager. “People bring recipes, and then they can go ahead and try them at home.” Each adventure’s weekly potlucks also create a supportive

After a community participates in a Healthy Eating Adventure, the journey continues with monthly potlucks. “The idea is you’re doing it with a supportive community, you’re not just trying to learn it on your own,” says Dr. Elizabeth George. “You have a supportive community of people who are trying to change their eating habits.”
Chad Smith leads the FitWalk group through stretches. He and other volunteer trainers advise participants on stretching or other strengthening exercises they might have questions about.

community, which continues to meet at monthly potlucks afterward.

Funded by a Summit Endowment, MACWell tracks participants' results with questionnaires and testing for cholesterol, glucose, triglycerides, and more. Elizabeth lost 12 pounds and saw her cholesterol drop from 190 to 125 during her 28-day adventure. In patients who have adopted a the wholefoods, plant-based diet, Dr. George has seen cholesterol drop, insulin dependence go down, acne and asthma clear up, and fatty livers reversed.

Nick Iula, Chartwells resident district manager at Shippensburg University, realized grocery list of benefits since participating in Shippensburg's Healthy Eating Adventure in 2012. Looking at an old photo of himself in the university's cafeteria, he notes that he was in the beginning stages of gout, had arthritis in his hips, fatty liver disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, restless leg syndrome and acid reflux. "The first thing I noticed, within the first three days, was I lost my acid reflux at night," Nick says. "And that was amazing." He lost 80 pounds, and now incorporates the principles he's learned into cooking classes he gives to Shippensburg students and when he talks to them about how to eat healthfully in the school's dining halls.

In addition to offering three Healthy Eating Adventures a year, MACWell hosts a hands-on Everyday Chef cooking class with local chefs in Mercersburg, Business Wellness Games, and supports projects to promote walkability and bikability in the community. And this summer, MACWell also is partnering with Building Our Pride in Chambersburg (BOPIC) on a community garden as part of BOPIC's children's program.