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'No Soda' Campaign Aims to Reduce Obesity in Austin

Frances Acuna and Jill Ramirez of the Manantial de Salud Dove Springs health network set up space at the Perez Elementary School fall fair to help visitors take the no-soda pledge. Photo by Margaret Nicklas.

**By Margaret Nicklas
For Reporting Texas**

On a recent Friday afternoon, children, parents and educators drifted in and out of Perez Elementary School in Southeast Austin enjoying the annual fall festival. Amid bouncy castles, food vendors and information tables, some visitors paused to sign up for the no-soda challenge, a campaign encouraging kids and adults to trade soda for better health.

Sylvia Hernandez Kauffman, wife of Perez Principal David Kauffman, took the pledge to lose weight, she said. She also wants to be part of the healthy living Perez promotes. Before taking the pledge, Kauffman typically drank one soda a day. Growing up in South Texas, her family drank soda with nearly every meal. "It's just a big part of our lives," she said.

Kauffman is among several hundred Austin adults and children who have pledged to forgo soda on weekdays during the school year. The challenge has been under way since August. It marks the first initiative by two local community networks that want to make Austin healthier by focusing on peer relationships, especially in lower-income neighborhoods.

The organizations, Manantial de Salud Dove Springs and the East Side Health Network, were formed to improve health in communities where incomes are lower and health tends to be poorer. And obesity, more prevalent among African Americans and Hispanics, is just one of the issues the groups are targeting. They are also promoting increased physical activity, tobacco-free living and preventive health care.

So far, 404 pledges had been received, said Alfred McAlister, a professor of health promotion and behavioral sciences at the University of Texas Health Science Center. McAlister administers a \$198,000 contract with the City of Austin that helps pay network employees' salaries.

In September, Stephen Pont of the Austin Independent School District announced that AISD was encouraging students and parents to take up the challenge. Pont is the medical director for AISD and for the Texas Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Childhood Obesity in Austin.

Obesity is a growing problem nationwide as well as locally. A 2012 report on the status of health in Travis County showed that 60 percent of adults are overweight or obese, and obesity rates are increasing. The same report showed that nearly 84 percent of African-Americans and nearly 71 percent of Hispanics are overweight or obese, compared with nearly 56 percent of whites.

The community networks, which each include about 60 members, began efforts with the no-soda challenge because it is “low-hanging fruit,” McAlister said, and sugary drinks are a well-known contributor to obesity.

[Research supports the link](#) between soda and obesity. A 2009 UCLA study found that adults who drank one or more sodas per day were 27 percent more likely to be obese or overweight than those who did not, regardless of ethnicity or income. More recent studies have linked sugary beverages with childhood obesity.

Some barriers to healthier living are cultural, according to Jill Ramirez, leader of Manantial de Salud and a director of the Latino Healthcare Forum. Drinking and offering soda to guests is a status symbol for Latinos, she said, and many Latinos see “chubbiness” as a sign of wealth.

So far, success has been dramatic in some cases and incremental in others. Frances Acuna, a network member in the Southeast Austin neighborhood of Dove Springs, has lost 23 pounds since giving up soda in July. She and her family had consumed 96 cans of soda per week, she said. She said it has been hard, especially for her husband, but it gets easier with time. “Now, weeks can pass, and I don’t miss it,” Acuna said.

Across town at Anderson High School, 46 teachers and staff drank water and ate fruit in lieu of soda for one week in October, said Richard Sanford, a teacher and coach there. The effort raised awareness, and participants were “amazed” to realize how much sugar and caffeine they had been drinking, Sanford said.

While hundreds of people have texted that they’re making the pledge, many more have viewed [blog posts](#) and YouTube videos, McAlister said. But no one knows how many people have actually stuck with the pledge. And the use of texting or social media to gauge participation is imprecise.

“Our demographic skews older,” said Marva Overton, leader of the East Side Health Network and executive director of the Alliance for African American Health in Central Texas. Texting and tweeting miss some people, she said, so the group is working on developing other means to get feedback on participation.

And while social media is a great way to publicize what the group is doing to a broader audience, it’s not the best way to reach residents of Dove Springs, said Alexandra Landeros, who maintains a [bilingual blog](#) for Manantial de Salud.

Both groups pass out fliers and attend meetings at churches and schools to get the word out.

McAlister is enthused about the successes, but he and others in health care know that fighting obesity will entail more than merely giving up soda.

“This is a problem that took decades to build up, and it’s going to take decades to knock it down,” he said. “And we’re just chipping away at it.”

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