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New Program in New Ulm Will Promote Shared Family Mealtimes and Physical Activity as Ways to Support Health

In today's society, busy schedules, evening activities, errands and the lure of technology can make it a struggle for families to have sit-down meals and find time to be physically active. Soon, a new study in New Ulm and surrounding areas will conduct research into whether having family meals and being active with your children before they hit puberty can help the entire family live a healthier lifestyle.

The research study will take the shape of a seven-month, family-based program called New Ulm-Healthy Home Offerings via the Mealtime Environment (NU-HOME). NU-HOME will work with families of children ages 7 to 10 to help them develop healthier eating behaviors and habits and promote physical activity. The program is a collaborative effort of the University of Minnesota's School of Nursing, Allina Health and its New Ulm Medical Center, the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation and Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project. The five-year study is being funded by a grant from the National Institutes of Health.

The Heart of New Ulm Project's Community Leadership Team is currently developing an action team to help plan and implement the program. For the last seven years, The Heart of New Ulm Project has been working to help adults in New Ulm make healthier eating and activity choices in order to reduce their risk for a heart attack. The NU-HOME program will complement those efforts as it engages both parents and children in setting goals to support each other and creating a home environment that nurtures healthful eating habits and physical activity.

Rebecca Lindberg, director of population health for the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation and The Heart of New Ulm Project, said, "Through NU-HOME, we will help support families in preparing and eating healthful meals and snacks together at home to help strengthen families and develop strong building blocks for lifelong healthy habits. Children may spend a lot of time at school, but for many children, most of their meals and snacks are eaten at home."

Jeff Bertrang, superintendent of New Ulm Public Schools, agreed. "While our schools have federal guidelines to follow for school meals, what happens at home really influences the choices kids make at school. The Heart of New Ulm Project has motivated many of the adults in our community to participate in new initiatives and I know families in our area will be excited about the opportunity to participate in this new program and study. It will help support our efforts around health in the schools, and will also show us what we can do to help children thrive in our community not only when they are young, but as a vital part of our community's future."

The study will be led by Dr. Jayne Fulkerson, a professor at the University of Minnesota who has more than 15 years of experience in family health promotion. Fulkerson said, "We want to engage both school-aged children and their families because families working together to promote health are more effective than when only parents or children are involved."

The goals of the program include promoting healthy habits by:

- Encouraging healthful foods and beverages at home and serving them at meals and for snacks

- Encouraging healthy portion sizes
- Encouraging more fruits and vegetables and fewer sugar-sweetened beverages
- Encouraging physical activity
- Reducing at-home screen time

If families are having trouble finding time to have meals together, the program will help them identify strategies to increase the number of family meals per week. If they are already eating family meals, the program will help them focus on making the meals healthful.

The NU-HOME program is currently in the early planning stages and will launch sometime in 2017. Additional partners will include Brown County Public Health, local elementary schools, University of Minnesota Extension Service and local colleges. If you are a parent of a 7-10 year old and are potentially interested in serving on the action team for the program being developed by The Heart of New Ulm Community Leadership Team, please call the NU-HOME project coordinator at 612-624-2610.

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