

Telling Missouri's Public Health Stories



Dips, Dance and Dentists: Saving the World – One Dream at a Time

Two years ago Dade County Health Department cut the ribbon on their brand new community fitness center to the cheers of a small local crowd. Today the Live Well Health and Fitness Center bustles with 600 members and offers personal training, meal planning, cooking classes, exercise classes, an after-school program and more.

While building and operating a fitness center is not a traditional core public health function, Dade County Health Department administrator Pam Allen recognized a need in her community and looked for a solution.

"It all started when my dad had a stroke," says Allen. "He needed physical therapy, and the closest thing was 50 miles away. He didn't go. He could have been better if he'd done his physical therapy, but it just didn't happen."



Administrator Pam Allen and Fitness Center Manager Rochelle Renkoski.

Photo source: Greenfield Vedette

She says situations like this are common in rural Dade County, with Springfield just too far away for seniors to travel for physical therapy. Community members told her they couldn't walk in their neighborhoods, either, because the ground was uneven, they were afraid of dogs, and they didn't want to be out in the weather.

Allen felt she had to do something. She searched, but was unable to find any grants to build a fitness center. She asked her Board of Directors to approve a loan for a building and exercise equipment, and they agreed. The local Great Southern Bank branch donated funds for equipment, and Citizens Memorial Hospital donated \$20,000 for an indoor state-of-the-art walking track.

"The building is climate-controlled, it's safe," says Allen. "If you do fall, it's on a rubber track. The building is open 24/7, and it is staffed weekdays from 8:30 am – 4:30 pm. Everybody is so excited they have somewhere they can go that's safe. They are so thankful we have a gym."

Cristi Neville joined Live Well Health and Fitness Center in May 2017. She says, "I was overweight and out of shape . . . I started doing Zumba once a week and then working out with various exercise machines. But I wanted to work on all parts of my body . . . Rochelle put me on a workout program for three days a week and a meal plan . . . Since then, I have lost 21 pounds. I have more energy, more stamina, I'm in a better mood, and I just feel better all around."

She adds that when her husband saw her success, he also joined the gym. She loves the fact that the Center is open 24 hours a day. Fitness Center manager Rochelle Renkoski says the 24/7 access was added last year.

"A lot of people that have different shifts or have late games aren't restricted by the hours now."

In addition to extending the hours, the Health Department works hard to identify creative ways to increase membership and continually motivate current members. It offers discounted rates to active or retired military. It offers a student rate. It gives group discounts to large employers who want to offer their employees fitness center memberships through worksite wellness programs. Local employer Pennington Seed, the fire department and area schools participate.



The Fitness Center also hosts a Student of the Month program. Students that are selected by their teachers as Student of the Month get a free month's membership.

Renkoski tries to motivate members with monthly challenges.

"I joined Live Well Fitness in December, 2017 after my doctor recommended 30 minutes of exercise 3 times a week in order to help with weight loss and to lower my cholesterol," says member Shari Benbrook. "Right after I joined, a Fitness Challenge was offered. I decided to participate in it . . . Live Well is ideal for me, and anyone . . . I am so glad I joined Live Well Fitness and highly recommend it to everyone."

The gym also offers Senior Social Hour once a month with coffee, snacks, walking and talking.

"It's fun to watch them," says Allen. "They have something to look forward to, and they make new friends. We recently received a thank you note from a lady who had just moved to our community. She attended the Senior Social Hour and wrote to say she had made a new friend there."

Renkoski relates a stream of other success stories, about members losing weight; a lady with diabetes who got her cholesterol level down so far she was able to stop her medication; a 74-year-old lady who could barely keep up with her husband as he went hiking and fishing and how outpaces him; and a 92-year-old member who participates in chair yoga and walks around the walking path. She says even local children enjoy exercising at the gym.

"We used to have a TV in the children's play area that they could watch while their parents worked out, but they kept trying to get on the exercise equipment with their parents. We found some child-friendly versions of treadmills and other exercise equipment to put in the play room, and they just love it!"

The Fitness Center allows children as young as 5 years old to participate in fitness classes like taekwondo, yoga or fitness dance.

"We leave it up to their parents to decide if they are old enough," says Rochelle.





For Dade County residents, the Fitness Center has become far more than just a gym – it is a center for developing healthy lifestyles and healthy community. Through a unique partnership, the University of Missouri Extension offers cooking classes and diabetes management classes. The 6-week series of weekly sessions fills up quickly, and Extension staff say they are the most successful classes in the area. Health Department staff offer meal planning and individual fitness coaching. Members can also choose from several exercise classes, like yoga, chair yoga, senior flex or dance fitness. In October the Center will be adding taekwondo classes and an after-school program.

And, as if all that wasn't success enough, the balance of Allen's big dream will soon come true. Thanks to a generous donation of equipment, Allen is moving forward with plans to open a dental clinic inside the Fitness Center.

"I wanted to do it even before the Fitness Center," says Allen. "There is one dentist in Greenfield, and he doesn't accept Medicaid. Adults put their dental care off so their children can get it. And dental health can make a big difference in your health. There is a huge need, but I didn't know how to do it."

Allen said she added an empty room when building the Fitness Center, knowing that someday she wanted to put a dental clinic in there. A few months ago she had the opportunity to buy some dental equipment, but just couldn't raise the funds or find a grant to cover the cost. She was shocked when a local couple, who wished to remain anonymous, said they recognized all that she was trying to do for the community and had decided to donate approximately \$60,000 worth of dental equipment to the Health Department.

"It was more than I could have dreamed of!" exclaims Allen. "There's a lot of good people out there – people that want to help you."

The donation included three exam room set-ups, including dental chairs and x-ray equipment – and installation. Allen has now partnered with Ozark Community Health Center, who will operate two dental stations with the option to expand. The clinic will see uninsured adults and children and adults with Medicaid. Allen hopes the dental clinic will be up and running by January 1, 2019.

Will the dental clinic finally appease Allen's passion to create a healthier Dade County? We think not!



She says, "My daughter said to me the other day, 'Mom, you can't save the world.' I said, 'No, but I can try!'"

We hope she keeps trying! Missouri needs public health leaders like Allen, acting as chief health strategists, inspiring their communities to work together to create an environment where everyone can be healthy – creating a healthier Dade County and creating a #HealthierMO.

The #HealthierMO initiative is seeking more stories like this one that demonstrate how partners in Missouri's greater public health system are working together to transform the future of public health in our state and offer every resident the opportunity for a healthier life. If you have a story to share, message us on Facebook @HealthierMO or email Communications Coordinator Jaci McReynolds at jmcreynolds@healthiermo.org. Learn more about the initiative and how you can get involved at HealthierMO.org or on Facebook @[HealthierMO](https://www.facebook.com/HealthierMO).