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BUSINESS NEWS 

Published: Wednesday, September 25, 2013

With wrist bands, coalition gears up for healthier kids

By Amy Watkins
HBJ Freelance Writer

MOUNTLAKE TERRACE — Thousands of fifth graders throughout Snohomish County will soon be wearing devices that track physical activity. It's all part of a Snohomish County Health Leadership Coalition initiative to promote better health and lifelong healthy habits.

The accelerometers, called Sqord PowerPods, track duration and intensity of movement. About 7,500 of these waterproof accelerometers will be supplied to schools beginning Oct. 8 and 16 for the voluntary "Gear Up and Go!" program.

"We'll be distributing to nearly 80 schools now and upwards of 250 classrooms," said Scott Forslund, director of the Snohomish County Health Leadership Coalition. "Every single school district in the county is in. We have been on a blistering pace for this."

The PowerPods, made by Sqord Inc., based in Durham, N.C., will measure any kind of movement from a vigorous sports practice to walking the dog, weeding the garden or washing dishes.

Students who wear the gadgets will sync their accelerometers with Sqord SyncStations and log on to the Sqord website to track their progress and view their earned points and rewards. Students will create a "PowerMe" character, see leader boards and be able to send encouraging messages, called "Squawks," from a fixed list to other players.

The Snohomish County Health Leadership Coalition's mission is to foster community vitality, competitiveness and prosperity through better health and health care value. It was started a year ago when Forslund, who is director of strategic communications for Premera Blue Cross, invited leaders from across the county to meet and discuss ideas around creating a more sustainable health care system.

By the end of the first meeting, the group decided to establish two initiatives, Forslund said. One would move an indicator of long-term community health and the other would move an indicator of the community's health associated with a problem that creates acute health care costs for families and communities. The 12-member coalition steering committee agreed that both initiatives would need to produce results within 18 months from the point that projects began and they were to be taken on with an 18-year vision.

In the next couple of months, the committee defined its youth initiative with a goal to help reverse the downward trend of youth exercise and activity by creating the nation's first online, real-time map of physical activity and measuring and tracking results.

"If you believe the studies that something like one third of kids are overweight or obese, it does impact a significant portion of youth," said Scott Washburn, coalition steering committee member and chief executive officer of YMCA of Snohomish

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Mark Mulligan / The Herald
(click to enlarge)
Scott Forslund wears a Sqord band, a device that measures physical activity. The bands will be given to Snohomish County fifth graders this fall.




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County. "We want to get in front of that issue. The goal is to create a positive environment to see where activity is taking place."

Sqord SyncStations will be placed in schools and in YMCAs throughout the county. Participating fifth graders will also receive a free YMCA membership and access to special YMCA programming for the school year, Washburn added.

Snohomish Health District statisticians and epidemiologists are going to review data generated from the Sqord bands, said Gary Goldbaum, Snohomish Health District director.

"We won't have access to individual results but in the aggregate we'll be able to see how students are doing and be able to focus in on what seems to help the student get more physical activity," he said.

Results could show what influences movement in and outside of schools and how social, economic and environmental determinants affect the levels of physical activity. Other questions surround whether students at schools where physical activity is required get more exercise; if recess before or after lunch makes a difference in levels of activity; if teacher involvement in the program helps to motivate students; and if taking advantage of memberships at the YMCA changes activity levels.

"There are a lot of questions that we have but at the end of the day I think it's a terrific opportunity and it is something everyone agreed is worth doing in our community," said Goldbaum, who is also a coalition steering committee member. "This is just one example of coming together and doing something that will improve the health of the entire community."

Another possible, positive result from the Gear Up and Go! project is if fifth graders score higher on the Washington State Healthy Youth Survey as sixth grade students, said Gary Cohn, superintendent of Everett Public Schools and coalition steering committee member. The survey has shown a steep decline in activity between the fifth and sixth grades, he added.

"If students establish healthy habits and lifestyle activities in fifth grade, those habits will likely last into their teens and beyond," Cohn said. "We know healthy bodies and healthy minds go hand in hand."

The coalition has also started a palliative care initiative that aims to make sure those with life-threatening illnesses receive care that is in line with their values. So far, work on the initiative has included discussions and training for health care providers led by physicians from The Everett Clinic and community education sessions.

"This is a difficult topic but this is making it easier to sit down and talk about it early on," said Jim Steinruck, chief executive officer of Senior Services of Snohomish County and member of the coalition steering committee. "There are other parts of this county that need to have these discussions... We're trying to take this out to the public."

Both of the coalition's efforts have projected costs of about \$450,000, said Forslund. About 90 percent of the cost is coming from Premera Blue Cross, Providence Health and Services in Washington and Oregon, The Everett Clinic, and Verdant Health Commission. Part of the coalition's plan is to make sure both initiatives become self-sustaining.

"From the beginning we are looking at how this can be community-based self-sustaining," Forslund said. "If at end of the day all we've created is another suck on our community's health care system and costs, we've failed and we're designing this is a way that that won't happen."

The coalition and its work along with the collaboration it has achieved from different organizations is unique, said Preston Simmons, chief executive officer of Providence Regional Medical Center. The initiatives are bookends in life, he added, with one focused on combatting youth obesity, a precursor for other possible health problems later in life, and the other addressing care in the final stages of life.

"We'll be looking at how this is making a difference and what the programs are we want to add in to this as we continue to evolve," Simmons said. "We want to be the healthiest county in the country."

To learn more about the Snohomish County Health Leadership Coalition, visit www.snocohealthleadership.org.

Sun, Oct 13, 2013, 2pm
Evergreen Library, 9512 Evergreen Way, Everett, WA 98204

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