



Philip Sherman | Staff photos

Jessica Walsh, left, director of prevention at the Women's Resource Center of Newport and Bristol Counties, and Olivia Kachingwe, a coordinator for the Health Equity Zone Collaborative, answer questions during the launch of the project on Wednesday at the Florence Gray Center in Newport.

Health Equity Zone launched

Effort will focus on improving health of the community

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

NEWPORT — More than 50 people turned out Wednesday evening to launch the new Newport Health Equity Zone Collaborative at a meeting in the Florence Gray Center that was informational and allowed people from the many different organizations involved in the project to socialize.

The lead agency for the cooperative effort is the Women's Resource Center of Newport and Bristol Counties and the agency's executive director, Lori N. DiPersio, welcomed the guests.

"We will be bringing together a lot of people in the community, especially in the north end and the Broadway area," she said.

The state Department of Health earlier this year approved a \$235,000 "Health Equity Zone Grant" for the project, which targets particular north end and Broadway census tracts. Additional funding could be awarded for up to four years.

Jessica Walsh, the Women's Resource Center's director of prevention, presented the project and explained how the organizations will be involved. She was assisted by Olivia Kachingwe, the new Health Equity Zone coordinator.

"This is a citywide coalition to help people to live the healthiest lives they can," Walsh said. "Place-based health grants are unusual. Most grants are disease-based."

One of goals of the project is to answer a series of questions such as, "How do you make environments where making healthy choices is the default?" Walsh said.



Lori DiPersio, left, executive director of the Women's Resource Center, and Jessica Walsh, director of prevention at the Women's Resource Center, talk before a presentation for the project's launch on Wednesday in Newport.

Core groups will form working groups to meet with residents in different sectors of community life.

The Education, Innovation and Economic Opportunity Working Group is being led by Fab Newport. Increased levels of education leads to decreased rates of disease and disability. Furthermore, prolonged unemployment can lead to increased levels of stress and limit one's availability to self-care resources.

The Physical and Emotional Health Working Group is being led by the Boys and Girls Clubs of Newport County. Physical activity has numerous health benefits. It reduces one's risk of cardiovascular disease, some cancers, type 2 diabetes and metabolic

syndrome, strengthens your bones and muscles, and can improve your mood.

The Arts and Culture Working Group is being led by the Arts & Cultural Alliance of Newport County. Among many other outcomes, involvement in the arts has been shown to abate stress and enhance immune function, develop communication and self-expression skills, and reduce delinquency and neighborhood crime.

The Food Access and Nutrition Working Group is being led by the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center. Food access and nutrition directly impact overall health and

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well-being in many ways. If adults are hungry, they often cannot function effectively — whether it is to work, or to take care of their children.

The Transportation Working Group is being led by Bike Newport. This working group will explore how commuters in Newport use transportation, particularly active transportation such as bicycling. Beyond the physical and emotional health benefits of active transportation, any mode of transportation allows one to access many health-related services and reduces the feeling of isolation and stress.

The Open Space Working Group is being led by the Aquidneck Land Trust. The links between open space and health are endless. Research shows that green spaces have the potential to improve self-perceived health, mental health, cognitive development among adolescents and perceived community connectedness.

The groups will begin meeting in October, Walsh said. They will be conducting needs assessments to determine what residents want from the project. This will be done initially through surveys and focus groups, she said.

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