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Group's goal: Make N.O. very healthy
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New Orleans can be one of the healthiest cities in the United States." That bold statement comes from the Internet Web site of a bold initiative called Step Together New Orleans, a collaborative effort led by the New Orleans Health Department in partnership with the independent, nonprofit Louisiana Public Health Institute to combat obesity, diabetes and asthma.

Step Together New Orleans is funded primarily by a five-year grant from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as part of the national Steps to a HealthierUS, a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services program that advances the Bush administration's goal of helping Americans live longer, better and healthier lives. Step Together New Orleans is in its second year.

A centerpiece of Steps to a HealthierUS is the five-year cooperative agreement program through which cities, states and tribal entities receive funds to implement chronic-disease-prevention efforts focused on reducing the burden of obesity, diabetes and asthma by addressing three related risk factors -- physical inactivity, poor nutrition and tobacco use or exposure.

Other Steps to a HealthierUS cities include Austin, Texas; St. Petersburg, Fla.; Philadelphia; Boston; Seattle; and Salinas, Calif.

"New Orleans is a wonderful city, but it is also one of the least-healthy cities in America," said Thomas Farley, chairman of the department of community health sciences at Tulane University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. "If we work together as a community, though, we can change that."

Tulane announced a gift of \$275,000 from the Entergy Charitable Foundation last month to support the "Treat You Right" campaign in coordination with Step Together New Orleans. The campaign promotes behaviors such as increasing walking and eating fruits and vegetables. "We want everyone to know that, if people stick with it, making small changes in how they eat and how active they are can change everything," says Farley, who is involved in Step Together New Orleans.

The "Treat You Right" campaign includes television, radio, bus and streetcar promotions of physical activity and healthy eating. The spots are hitting the streets and airwaves this month.

Step Together New Orleans' obesity interventions also include helping churches and community centers start physical activity groups, collaborating with planning officials to make the city more friendly to pedestrians and bikers and working with

community gardens and farmers markets to increase accessibility to fresh fruits and vegetables.

"We are coordinating with multiple community groups and local and state government agencies exploring ways to make the city's physical environment more friendly toward healthier behaviors like biking and walking, while encouraging our community members to get active and eat healthy," Step Together New Orleans program director Carolyn Fernandez said.

Last month, the Crescent City Farmers Market expanded New Orleanians' access to purchase fresh, locally grown, affordable products by allowing residents to make purchases using their food stamps. The expansion of the farmers market was the result of collaboration with the Food and Nutrition Service Field Office in Baton Rouge, Loyola University New Orleans' Economics Institute, other farmers markets across the country and Step Together New Orleans.

The Department of Health and Human Services says obesity rates have increased more than 60 percent among adults in the last 10 years, and have doubled among children and tripled among adolescents since 1980. Self-reported diabetes has jumped 50 percent since 1990, and more than 31 million Americans have been diagnosed with asthma, HHS says.

Step Together New Orleans' asthma care work group is joining local health-care providers -- LSU and Tulane Health Sciences Centers, Children's Hospital and University Hospital -- to develop more-effective asthma management plans for children identified as high-risk asthmatics. The American Lung Association says asthma accounted for 14.6 million lost school days nationwide in 2002.

Step Together New Orleans' diabetes clinical care work group is building a citywide diabetes registry that will help health-care providers monitor patients who receive diabetes medications. The American Diabetes Association says diabetes was the sixth-leading cause of death listed on U.S. death certificates in 2000.

Fernandez insists that New Orleans can be one of the country's healthiest cities. "I think it is realistic. Will it happen overnight? No," she said. "We can't be the 'Big Easy.' We have to change that."

Joe Gyan Jr. is The Advocate's New Orleans bureau chief.