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Program helps disabled county residents 'Get FIT'

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Seeking an easier way to help the disabled get the exercise they need while improving their quality of life, the Family Resource Network (FRN) developed the program "Get FIT."

The program began in the summer of 2008 and serves the disabled in New Jersey's Camden, Gloucester and Salem counties. It uses Rowan University students to teach disabled persons and their caregivers proper nutrition and fitness plans, according to Barbara Wilhite, Ed.D., who runs the program.

"This program helps the disabled and their caregivers have more access to the services they need," she said. Agencies involved with FRN include Autism Family Services of New Jersey, Caregivers of New Jersey and the Family Support Center of New Jersey. It is funded by a \$32,000 grant from the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities (NJCDD).

Get FIT (Fitness, Integration, Training) takes a two-pronged approach: It provides health and wellness opportunities for people with developmental disabilities, and gives university students pursuing health-promotion careers experience working with the disabled.

The program enables people with developmental disabilities — as well as their caregivers — to access health screenings to promote early detection of health problems. An individual's specific risk and health factors can be addressed while tailoring the intervention to meet their particular abilities. Those found to be at risk for secondary conditions, or who want to learn more about a topic, can attend additional workshops on health promotion.

While the bulk of the program takes place on Rowan University's campus, FRN has done a few sessions at The Arc of Salem County, a local nonprofit that serves people with disabilities — sparking interest among several of its clients.

Wilhite said participants come in for three sessions to determine personal nutrition plans and up to three times a week to work on their fitness plans. The program runs according to the academic calendar of September through May so that university facilities can be used, and students from the Rowan's Health and Exercise Science division can participate.

In the future, Get FIT wants to provide more rigorous research opportunities for the college students — to monitor fitness outcomes, continue health screenings and build databases to help people and their care providers know more about their medical history. The program is also interested in pursuing relationships with other colleges and county governments to form a coalition of various disability, and health and wellness professionals throughout the state.

"There has been a lot of interest in this program, and we want to expand it to more areas so that it eventually helps the entire state of New Jersey and other counties across the country," Wilhite said.


As of September, the program will not be funded by the NJCDD grant. Its organizers plan to seek financial help from counties and other sources.


For more information about the Get FIT program, call Barbara Wilhite at 856/685-8852 or visit the FRN Web site at www.familyresourcenetwork.org.

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