ABSTRACT

• The primary goal of this program is to improve the overall quality of life of adolescent girls in the Wiregrass region by providing a holistic 3-pronged healthcare approach that addresses the mental, nutritional, and physical health needs of girls enrolled in 4th-8th grade in the Dothan public school system.

• A secondary goal of the program is to demonstrate the value of utilizing medical students to bridge the gap between general physician recommendations and patient outcomes, especially in underserved communities, whose limited resources only further emphasize the health disparities faced by them.

BACKGROUND

Alabama currently has the 5th highest adult obesity rate in the United States, the 6th highest youth obesity rate, and the 5th highest poverty rate. It is also 2nd and 3rd in the country for the highest food insecurity rate in adults and children, respectively. Children who are food insecure often experience health issues and are at greater risk for behavioral problems and academic difficulties in the future. Houston County, and Dothan in particular, are unfortunately not exempt from these staggering rates.

OBJECTIVES

• To improve students’ understanding of mental health
• To improve students’ ability to practice self-care and mental health
• To improve students’ understanding of nutritional health
• To improve students’ ability to practice nutritional health

METHODS

• In order to fully address the health needs of the adolescent Wiregrass community, the methods for establishing this service project included mentorship, education, and networking.

• The strategy for addressing mental health included working to create an environment in which students feel comfortable voicing any concerns they might have as well as educating them on what actually constitutes mental health. It also included teaching students how to prioritize their own mental health, look out for the mental health of those around them, and work to fight the stigma against mental illness.

• The approach for teaching nutritional health to students included educating them on proper nutrition in a way that both interests them and addresses their specific needs.

• The strategy for addressing nutritional health included working to create an environment in which students feel comfortable voicing any concerns they might have as well as educating them on what actually constitutes mental health. It also included teaching students how to prioritize their own mental health, look out for the mental health of those around them, and work to fight the stigma against mental illness.

RESULTS

NUTRITIONAL HEALTH lessons

• The girls responded very well to the nutritional health unit. Before the unit, every single girl answered at least one question with “I don’t know.” After the unit, not one girl responded with “I don’t know for any of the questions.”

• The girls were able to successfully learn about the following topics and skills:
  - What is nutritional health?
  - Vitamins and minerals
  - Calories, fats, carbohydrates, and proteins
  - Fruits and vegetables
  - Understanding nutritional labels
  - Special nutrition requirements and diets
  - Making healthy food choices

MENTAL HEALTH lessons

• The girls responded very well to the mental health unit. Before the unit, every single girl answered at least one question with “I don’t know.” After the unit, not one girl responded with “I don’t know for any of the questions.”

• The girls were able to successfully learn about the following topics and skills:
  - What is mental illness?
  - Stigma, prejudice, and discrimination
  - Stress management
  - Goals
  - Social media usage and safety
  - Self-care

CONCLUSIONS

• The 28 girls enrolled in the two classes that I taught from December 2018-May 2019 responded very well to the pilot health program.

• When asked about their overall impression of the program, every single one of them responded positively.

• Based on my interactions with the girls, my review of their surveys, and their comments throughout the program, I believe that they all showed improved knowledge in their understanding of both mental and nutritional health.

• Furthermore, they demonstrated that they were able to not only retain that knowledge throughout the weeks but to share that knowledge with others around them as well-for example, their siblings and classmates. This leads me to the conclusion that this health program has been a benefit to the girls and successfully met its goals.

• My hope was that by partnering with Girls’ Inc. for this pilot health program, I could do my part as a medical student and member of my community to help students learn the importance of mental health, connect them to nutritious food options they may be currently missing, and encourage them to pursue more physical activity. With compassion and understanding for the unique needs of the adolescent Wiregrass community, I sought to help students become more active participants in their own health.

• This healthcare initiative was created with other communities in mind so that any other student who sought to introduce it to their community would be able to do so as well, so a long-term goal of the project is to continue molding it into an easily replicable program for others to adopt.