

Friday, July 31, 2015

Pontiac kids getting a kick out of new soccer program

The **Healthy Pontiac, We Can!** program has launched the first Save-A-Lot Food Stores Pontiac Summer Youth Soccer Program. The six-week program offers local children an opportunity to engage in fun, non-competitive physical activity for boys and girls of all ages and abilities.

“With the growing childhood obesity epidemic, providing free or low-cost opportunities for children to get physical activity in a safe setting in their community is critical,” said **Jennifer Lucarelli**, assistant professor of Health Sciences at Oakland University and community chairperson of Healthy Pontiac, We Can! “The recommendation is for kids to get 60 minutes of activity per day, and we know many kids aren't getting close to that amount.”

The program is entirely free for participating children. Kids just drop-in, no prior registration is required. The session consists of a half hour of skills/lessons, and a half hour of fun game play. Healthy Pontiac, We Can! provides all the equipment (balls, shin guards, pop up soccer nets, cones, jerseys) at each of the sites through generous donations of community partners.

The goal of the program is to fill in that gap between the kids that join a team or league and those who get no exercise. It is another way that Pontiac kids get an opportunity to be active.

“I had one boy, about 12 years old, come up to me after a Friday lesson and exclaim, ‘I feel alive again’ and went on to tell us he hadn't played soccer in 5 years! That makes it all worth it,” added Lucarelli.

Professional players and coaches from the **Michigan Stars Football Club** coach the lessons and children from the ages of 3-16 are already benefiting from the exercise time.

All of the soccer sessions are scheduled at sites that are part of the **Meet Up & Eat Up program**, another branch of the Healthy Pontiac, We Can! program that provides free meals to anyone under the age of 18 during the summer months to help fill the gap when school is out of session and many families struggle with providing these extra meals to their children.

“Soccer is scheduled either right before or right after the meal so that kids have an opportunity to not only get an hour of physical activity, but also have access to a nutritious meal,” added Lucarelli. “This was something that all of our community sponsors really appreciated about the program.”

Here is a **list of Meet Up & Eat Up with Summer Soccer program locations** going on through August 14:

Mondays @ Richardson Park from 5pm-6pm; (Meal 6 p.m. - 6:25 p.m.)

Wednesdays @ WHRC from 11am-12pm; (Meal 11 a.m. – 1 p.m.)

Thursdays @ Murphy Park from 1pm-2pm; (Meal 12:30 p.m. – 1 p.m.)

Fridays @ Walton Park Manor from 1pm-2pm; (Meal 12:30 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.)



Jennifer Lucarelli, Oakland professor and community chairperson of Healthy Pontiac, We Can!, (foreground), and other OU volunteers help Murphy Park summer camp kids with their shin guards before soccer.



Health Sciences professor Jennifer Lucarelli, Ed Bahoura, community partner from Save-A-Lot Food Stores, soccer coaches and volunteers take time out for a photograph with many of the Murphy Park soccer program participants.