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Rochester Business Alliance, Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency target hypertension

Tom Tobin
Staff writer

The local business and health communities are collaborating on a major initiative to combat hypertension by making it easier for people to keep track of their blood pressure and for doctors to use that information in treatment.

The health planning team of the Rochester Business Alliance's Healthcare Initiative has formed a partnership with the nonprofit Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency to raise awareness of the dangers of high blood pressure and to identify ways to collect data from thousands of residents.

"The intent here is to improve the health of the community irrespective of what's going on in Washington," said Fran Weisberg, executive director of the Finger Lakes agency, referring to the congressional debate over health care. Weisberg was instrumental in establishing a community-wide planning process on hospital expansion.

One method being considered is to create a much-expanded network of blood-pressure machines in stores, shopping malls, and even beauty salons and barber shops.

The idea, said Wegmans Food Market executive and health planning chair Paul Speranza, is to collect information from machine readouts and connect it to a database accessible by doctors so they're better equipped to treat hypertension.

Estimates are that more than 30 percent of Americans have hypertension or high blood pressure, which can lead to stroke, heart disease and liver failure. High blood pressure rates are disproportionately high in minority communities and among children, who also suffer an epidemic of obesity.

"We've decided that high blood pressure is the problem we will address and we're now in the process of figuring out ways to accomplish that," Speranza said.

This, he said, will be a larger, more comprehensive community health initiative than even the highly successful Eat Well, Live Well program now in place at more than 300 local companies.

"We're blending the resources of the Health Systems Agency with those of the business community," Speranza said.

Speaking recently to the Greater Rochester Quality Council, a business group, Speranza said that hundreds of volunteers are being sought and community outreach broadened to ensure that the blood-pressure effort reflects the best thoughts of the community.

The initiative is using seed money of \$200,000 from the Wegman Foundation to get started, with the idea of raising more funds as plans materialize. The goal is to have a strategy ready to implement by

the end of the first quarter of 2010.

TTOBIN@DemocratandChronicle.com