The Healthy Living Program (HLP) and its Latino counterpart, Vida en Salud (VES), are culturally tailored programs to improve the physical activity, nutrition, and overall health of African-American and Latino adults. Offered by the URMC’s Center for Community Health (CCH) in partnership with the YMCA of Greater Rochester, the HLP/VES is designed to fill an unmet need for health and fitness programs that are both accessible and affordable for underserved populations in Rochester’s urban neighborhoods.

Like many older American cities, Rochester exemplifies a “tale of two cities,” with a relatively affluent, healthy suburban population and an inner city population struggling with poverty and its associated health challenges. Physical activity and nutrition education are proven approaches to improving overall health. However, financial, cultural, and geographic barriers lead to underutilization of the few opportunities that exist for ongoing physical activity and healthy promotion for city residents.

Piloted in 2002 to address this disparity, the HLP was initially offered to African-American adults with health issues related to heart disease, diabetes, and stroke at disproportionate levels. It was one of the first comprehensive, culturally sensitive health improvement and physical activity programs available to city residents right in their own neighborhoods. Following the program’s inception—and success!—a Latino version of the program, Vida en Salud, was developed.

HLP/VES programs are conducted in church basements, community settings, and city recreation centers. Participants sign up for a 12-week program, which includes 24 sessions that meet twice per week for an hour and a half. The first 45 minutes of each session are dedicated to health and nutrition information, followed by 45 minutes of exercise at all fitness levels. Participants develop individual action plans and health goals. Each participant receives an individualized health assessment to help him or her focus on self-identified areas for improvement.

The success of the HLP/VES program can be attributed to the utilization of social support, empowerment, and goal setting to improve the health of participants in the program. The program serves approximately 150 individuals a year and many see improvements in their overall health, including weight management, lower blood pressure, and a decrease in their body mass index. Others report an increase in their energy and endurance. While weight loss is not the goal of the program, leading a healthier lifestyle is. One satisfied participant couldn’t help but express her delight with her progress when she exclaimed, “I’ve dropped a dress size! My family is so proud of me.”

For further information about the program, contact Stacey DeJesus, Community Liaison, Center for Community Health, 224-3059, Stacey_dejesus@urmc.rochester.edu.