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Latina teens urge city leaders to re-open pools, boost activity options



Watch footage of a group of Latina teens who recently assessed their city's parks and led a petition drive to urge the Common Council of New Britain, Conn., to re-open some closed pools.

Rosemarie Burgos and Melanie Benitez were a bit nervous.

The two teens—on a night when their friends might be home watching TV—were about to stand before the Common Council of New Britain, Conn., and argue that the city should plan to re-open pools to boost local physical activity options.

But they came prepared.

Months before that Sept. 8 city meeting, Benitez, Burgos and other Latina teens joined a pilot project led by the Community Health Center and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) through *Salud America!* The RWJF Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children.

As part of the project, the girls took photos of parks and the closed pools littered with trash and graffiti, interviewed kids, parents and city officials on the need for water-related exercise options, and got 100 signatures on a petition to re-open pools.

Then, at the meeting, Burgos and Benitez made their **pitch**.

And although the council aldermen didn't decide the issue on Sept. 8, the girls plan to reach out to the mayor to keep pushing for pool re-openings.

"Through our [project], we all came to the conclusion that we care about these pools and our parks being open," Burgos said. "The main purpose in trying to get these pools open is to get people to be more active, to reduce obesity."

The girls' efforts were made possible by the Community Health Center's *Salud America!* pilot project, a mid-course evaluation of an obesity prevention and leadership development program, Healthy Tomorrows for New Britain Teens.

Researchers had local Latina teens do a Photovoice project to identify healthy and unhealthy influences in the community.

The girls—Burgos, Benitez, Veronica

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Director's Corner

Letter to members from Dr. Amelie Ramirez

You might remember our inaugural *Salud America!* Scientific Summit.

Our much-lauded **event** raised awareness of the challenges we all face in confronting the epidemic of childhood obesity among Latino children and potential strategies for doing so. The 200 attendees were greeted by big names from all over the country—17th U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Richard Carmona, Lance Armstrong (by video), an ex-NBA player and others.

A few weeks ago, we had our 2nd Annual Scientific Summit—a much smaller, but no less productive, event.

This year, we showcased our 20 *Salud America!* pilot investigators, who are halfway through their RWJF-funded projects and are making significant progress on a variety of nutrition, physical activity and policy issues affecting Latino children. For instance:

- Several pilots already have developed new surveys, tools and products;



Amelie Ramirez

- More than half have presented their project and results at a regional or national conference, or to a group of community leaders or policy-makers;
- Many have had abstracts or posters accepted for presentation; and
- Many have been featured in newspapers or on Web sites.

Our 20 investigators also are using their pilot funding to get a foothold at their institutions and build their research portfolios. More than 15 have submitted grant applications based directly on their pilot work or other work in childhood obesity.

That's good news in the ongoing fight against Latino childhood obesity.

As always, please be sure to frequently check our **Web site** for updates on our and **others'** efforts to address Latino childhood obesity.

Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H.

Director, *Salud America!*

Director, Institute for Health Promotion Research
UT Health Science Center at San Antonio



News Briefs

Active Video Games Supplement P.E. Class

Some experts believe active video games can help stem childhood obesity. In a recent article, [USA Today](#) examined local efforts to get kids to be more active using such games. Dr. James Sallis, a member of the *Salud America!* National Advisory Committee and director of Active Living Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, commented on the benefits of "exergames." *Salud America!* pilot investigator Dr. Zan Gao of Texas Tech University is **testing** how *Dance Dance Revolution*, a dance video game, impacts Latino children's fitness levels.

Salud America! membership number rises

The number of *Salud America!* members has surpassed 1,700 as of October 2010, up from about 1,300 a year ago. We constantly are gaining new members, and we urge you to invite colleagues to join, as well as others you may know who are interested in addressing the problem of obesity among Latino children. Join the network [here](#).



Blog on Latino health, childhood obesity

The team behind *Salud America!* runs a **blog**, called *SaludToday*, focusing on Latino child and adult health, including obesity and cancer. We also have Twitter, Facebook and YouTube pages—just search "*SaludToday*."

Funding Opportunities

Grant Listings

RWJF and the NIH have other obesity-related research funding opportunities that are currently seeking applications. In addition, the National Collaborative for Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR) and Live Smart Texas collect and display grant opportunities from other organizations in the field.

[RWJF Calls for Proposals](#)

[NIH Obesity Grants](#)

[NCCOR Obesity Grants](#)

[Live Smart Texas](#)

Active Living Research Grants

Active Living Research, another RWJF national program, is seeking **proposals** for studies of emerging or anticipated changes in physical activity-related policies or environments. Grants are awarded on a rolling basis. Letters of intent may be submitted until July 1, 2011.

Stepping Up Against Latino Childhood Obesity

Students, teachers add dancing to Spanish class



Bailamos is Spanish for, “Let’s dance.”

But in Cathy Bohnak’s Spanish class in Medina Valley High School in Castroville, Texas, students don’t just learn the term—they perform it.

In class, students dance and march along to a pair of student-created **dance videos** while they recite and practice Spanish vocabulary words.

“This is a fun way to get exercise and learn Spanish vocabulary at the same time,” Bohnak said.

The dance videos are part of a school-wide plan to get Medina Valley students moving.

In addition to the Spanish class, activities to get students moving have been implemented in math and science classes, too. Several teachers also volunteered to host a video-led exercise session for students before school and a Salsa dance class after school.

The school’s efforts were recently recognized by the Alliance for a Healthier Generation.

25 kids tackling obesity in their communities

Following a national search, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation selected 25 youths representing a diverse mix of backgrounds, including several Latinos, to join its 2010-2011 Youth Advisory Board. Guided by unique experiences and opinions, the board not only provides feedback on the **empowerME Movement** programs and strategies, but also continues the leadership of past boards by creating social networking campaigns around healthy living, speaking at stakeholder conferences, engaging with government leaders and initiating healthy changes through service-learning and other projects at school and in their neighborhoods. **Read more** about them and what they are doing to fight obesity in their communities.



Salud America! NAC

Elva Arredondo
Marice Ashe
Laura Brennan
Nancy Butte
Anna Diez-Roux
Robert Garcia
Lawrence Green
Robin Hamre
Terry Huang
Barbara Israel
Laura Kettel Khan
Judith Ottoson
Frank Penedo
Charlotte Pratt
Maya Rockeymoore

► James Sallis

Randy Schwartz
Mary Story
Elsie Taveras
Mildred Thompson
Amy Lazarus Yaroch

Meet the National Advisory Committee (NAC)

Long before researcher James Sallis was dubbed an “obesity warrior” by **Time Magazine**, he was a psychology student at tiny Belhaven College in Jackson, Miss., in 1974.

The school was so small it had just one psychology professor.

But that professor, Dr. Fredericka Elia, changed Sallis’ life by taking an interest in him and encouraging him to get involved in research and go to graduate school.

“I had no idea what graduate school was,” said Sallis. “So if it was not for the direction she gave me, my life would have been very different.”

Sallis has gone on to become one of today’s most noted researchers in the areas of physical activity,



James Sallis

nutrition and obesity.

He is a professor of psychology at San Diego State University and director of Active Living Research, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation national program that aims

to prevent childhood obesity in low-income and high-risk racial/ethnic communities by supporting research on environmental and policy influences on physical activity.

He has made many **contributions** in the areas of physical activity measurement, correlates of activity, interventions and advocacy. His health improvement programs have been studied and used in health care settings, schools, universities and companies.

Sallis, one of the world’s most cited authors in the social sciences, currently uses research to inform policy and environmental changes to increase activity and reduce obesity.

He said he’s long been interested in reducing obesity among the underserved.

“When I moved to San Diego in the early 1980s, I was struck by the visible levels of obesity in Latino youth,” he said. “Our [pediatrics] group conducted a family intervention study that educated me about many of the factors putting Latino youth at risk for obesity, as well as the family strengths that should give us hope.”

Sallis hopes future research will assess the impact of a range of policies on childhood obesity among Latino youth.

Grantee Corner

Meet *Salud America!* Grantee Nelda Mier



Nelda Mier

Teen pregnancy. No health care. High rates of disease.

Many sad stories of Latino health problems crossed the desk of Nelda Mier, co-editor for the *Los Angeles Times'* Spanish-language edition, in the late 1990s.

It inspired her to find ways to improve Latino health.

Mier went on to produce national health radio segments for Latinos and later switched careers entirely—earning a doctorate in health education in 2002 and launching research aimed at solving minority health problems.

“From that point, I have tried to build a successful career in improving the health of Latinos,” said Mier, currently an associate professor at the School of Rural Public Health at the Texas A&M Health Science Center in McAllen, Texas. “I have focused my entire life trying to make a difference in the lives of those who are in most need.”

Today, obesity is one of Mier’s top issues.

Mier is one of 20 pilot [researchers](#) funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through *Salud America!* for \$75,000 over two years.

She hopes to produce policy recommendations that can improve the built environment so it encourages physical activity among Latino children and their families in colonias, rural areas of South Texas that often resemble third-world countries.

Mier and her team are:

- assessing the built environment to map physical activity options in colonias;



As part of Mier’s *Salud America!* project, she helped train lay healthy workers to assess the built environment in colonias, underdeveloped areas of South Texas like the one shown here.



Mier knows how alarming childhood obesity is here.

When she joined the Texas A&M Health Science Center, one of her first projects found that 18 percent of Latino preschoolers in the region were obese.

“We also discovered that the kids in our study consumed between 2,300-2,600 calories every day, far exceeding recommendations,” Mier said. “And not only did we find this huge health disparity, we also highlighted a grave public health concern: Latino children that are obese will most likely become obese adults, and obese adults are at greater risk of suffering from disabling, degenerative chronic diseases.”

That’s why Mier is excited about what her project can accomplish.

“We’re showing that the solution isn’t about expecting people to choose and change their health behaviors alone,” she said, “but that all of us need to be active players in changing our immediate social and built environment to make it more supportive of a healthy lifestyle.”

- conducting focus groups to identify the perceptions and experiences of colonia children about factors that influence their activity; and
- engaging local policy-makers on how to affect environmental policy change.

“I hope we can create awareness among local stakeholders and policy-makers about how the environment influences lifestyles in colonias,” Mier said. “I also hope to trigger in them a strong interest in mobilizing resources and taking action to make colonias more supportive of physical activity for kids and families.”

View a slideshow of Dr. Mier’s project


Assessing the built environment in colonias to influence policy promoting physical activity in Mexican American children and families
 Nelda Mier, Ph.D.
 Associate Professor
 Texas A&M School of Rural Public Health
 September 10, 2009

Grantee Corner

Meet *Salud America!* Grantee Cristina Barroso

Cristina Barroso's family, just like many Mexican-American families across the nation, has struggled with weight issues and type 2 diabetes.

She admits she's never really been *delgada*—skinny—either.

But Barroso stays physically active, eats right and is in better shape than she was in college—and she does innovative research that helps Latino youths overcome body image issues to promote adoption of beneficial active living and healthy eating practices.



Cristina Barroso

"I aim to be the 'research queen of Mexican-American 'tweens' to help middle-schoolers improve their body image and health," said Barroso, an assistant professor of health promotion/behavioral sciences at The UT Health Science Center at Houston, Brownsville Regional Campus.

"I am Mexican-American, so I know the customs and traditions of my community, which enables me to work with the community and youths to help them improve their well-being."

Barroso is one of 20 pilot **researchers** funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through *Salud America!* for \$75,000 over two years.

For her project, Barroso is characterizing the perceptions of healthy body types across generations among Mexican-Americans and examining the association between body builds and physical activity in kids across developmental stages.

She is surveying 210 Mexican-American children, parents and grandparents and taking several measures of physical activity.

"Data from this study will help one of our community groups enhance their programs and policies," Barroso said. "It also will lay the groundwork for future intervention studies aimed at increasing youths' physical activity, thereby reducing disease risk."

This type of outcome is one Barroso seemed destined to make.

As a child and through high



For Dr. Barroso's *Salud America!* project, she interviewed Mexican-American children, parents and grandparents about their perceptions of body type and health, and measured activity among children.



school, she excelled in science. Her parents encouraged her to pursue higher education, just as they did with her five other siblings.

At first, Barroso wanted to be a doctor.

But after college, she found public health when she signed up for an epidemiology course while working as a research assistant at a hospital in her hometown Detroit.

"It was then that I realized that I could combine science, math, psychology, sociology, history, etc., into a profession," Barroso said. "The beauty of public health is that it's the true umbrella for all health sciences (medicine, nursing, biomedical research, etc)."

And today, bolstered by mentorship by noted Texas researchers Drs. Alfred McAlister, Steven Kelder and Deanna Hoelscher, she's refining her skills in intervention design, data collection and analysis, and evaluation studies.

She also recently led an investigation of the impact of Texas' Senate Bill 42 on middle-school children's physical activity levels.

She has high hopes for her *Salud America!* project.

Barroso noted, "I hope my project leads to a better scientific understanding of the cultural beliefs about body size and shape that may affect physical inactivity and ultimately obesity in Mexican Americans along the Texas-Mexico border."

View a slideshow of Dr. Barroso's Project

Body Image Perceptions Among Mexican-Americans

Cristina S. Barroso, DrPH
Jennifer L. Gay, PhD

University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston
School of Public Health, Brownsville Regional Campus
Presented to *Salud America!* Scientific Summit
September 10, 2009



Research

Examining Latino children's low physical activity levels

Even though Latino kids are consistently less active than white kids, few studies have investigated the reasons behind this, and few physical activity interventions have involved Latino kids, according to a new [study](#).

The study, published recently in the *Journal of Applied Research on Children*, was led by Dr. Norma Olvera, a *Salud America!* pilot investigator from the University of Houston.

Dr. Olvera and others reviewed research and statistics on Latino children's disparate overweight and obesity rates, the link between obesity and physical activity, activity patterns and what influences them, cultural and socio-environmental factors and interventions designed to promote activity and fitness.

The researchers then made recommendations to help researchers, practitioners and policy-makers.

For researchers, these are some of the recommendations:

- Increase the number of longitudinal studies to determine the effect of individual, social and environmental factors on activity or fitness in Latino children across time.
- Increase work to validate instruments or use other methods (accelerometry) to determine physical activity.
- Increase research into the effects of culture on overweight and physical activity among Latino children, especially with regard to gender, language, diet and social opportunities.

For practitioners:

- Increase opportunities for sport participation through childhood and adolescence, especially among middle-school children.
- Encourage participation in organized aerobic programs, such as step aerobics and dancing, to promote moderate-to-vigorous activity in overweight Latino girls.
- Develop interventions that include family member participation, including parents and siblings.



Norma Olvera

For policy-makers:

- Make physical activity among minority youth a priority item on community and city council agendas.
- Improve safety in neighborhoods, parks, schools, and community in general to increase physical activity.
- Establish school policies for safe biking to and from school or parks for Latino children.
- Implement physical activity interventions during the after-school hours and the summer at schools, community centers and churches.

"Relevant research regarding Latino children's physical activity patterns and the factors that influence such patterns will increase awareness among health educators, practitioners and policy-makers, and help in developing strategies to enable Latino children to adopt an active lifestyle," the researchers write.

[Read more](#) about Dr. Olvera's *Salud America!* pilot project on Latino childhood obesity.

Policy & Built Environment Corner

‘Food policy councils’ can make communities healthier

A “food policy council,” a group of people that advocate for a healthier local food system, is one way to achieve policy and environmental change and improve the quality and availability of healthy food in a community or state.

The purpose of a food policy **council** is to advise residents and governments on how to develop policies and programs to improve local food systems, and to provide them support in doing so. The ultimate goal is to increase access to and availability of affordable, healthy foods, according to the CDC.

Some actions food policy councils can take to improve the food environment are:

- protect community and urban gardens by helping to change city zoning codes;
- support policies to create a farm-to-school program; or
- improve access to food assistance programs and healthy foods for low-income or racial/ethnic populations.

Food policy council members can be a diverse group of individuals with expertise in various parts of our



food system, such as farmers and food producers, food processors, food retailers, faith-based groups, food banks, restaurants, universities, consumers or members of agriculture, education, health, human services or transit industries.

The members of a council can be appointed by government, selected by other members of the council, or can be volunteers. These council members have a shared interest in changing the food system to improve the health of their community.

For a report on a variety of food policy councils, their structures, successes and challenges, read the [study](#) done by Food First and the Community Food Security Coalition. The CDC also [describes](#) council activities in several states.

To find out if your community has a food policy council, go [here](#).

If your community does have a council, attend a meeting or get involved by e-mailing the [contact person](#) for your community’s council. If not, go [here](#) to learn how to start a council.

Policy News Briefs

Reshaping Somerville: One town’s fight against child obesity

Just as the U.S. obesity rate continues to rise, the number of efforts to fight the epidemic is increasing, too. For example, in Somerville, Mass., an innovative anti-obesity program is making real progress. PBS, in cooperation with its colleagues at Blueprint America, sent medical correspondent Dr. Emily Senay to Somerville, which is just outside Boston, to see how the program works. Watch the report [here](#).



Somerville, Mass., is making progress against childhood obesity.

RWJF Center highlights federal policy issues

The RWJF Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity sends weekly email updates on policy and federal agency news. To learn more about the Center, visit

its [Web site](#). Click on “Stay Informed” to sign up for the email updates. The Center also aims to keep people up to date on new legislation [here](#).

Teens urge activity options

► Continued from page 1

Simon-Tirado, Katherine Perez, Julissa Aguilar and Taysha Rivera—worked with researchers and city officials to document the state of New Britain community parks by taking photos.

In their two neighborhood parks, the girls' lenses found debris, vandalism and graffiti, but no children or adults playing.

Pools quickly became a focal point.

In fact, the girls found that the pools in their two neighborhood parks had closed, while two parks in more affluent areas of the city had pools open.

So the girls combined their photos, captions and maps to make presentations to city leaders. They also led a petition drive that collected more than 100 signatures in support of re-opening the pools.

"This is something that is very important to the health of children in

the city, especially Latino children," said Jayme Hannay, an investigator on the project, which is led by Dr. Robert Dudley. "The pools are a big way these youths get the exercise they need."

The local newspaper, the *New Britain Herald*, covered the girls' **presentation** to the New Britain Common Council. The reporter wrote that the girls "put to rest the idea that young people are not interested in civic affairs as they presented their views of the closing of city pools and the need for activity for city children."

The article generated dozens of supportive comments.

"I am very proud of the accomplishments of my students," said Mary Moran, principal of E.C. Goodwin High School, where Burgos and Benitez attend. "Once they made a commitment to a cause, they courageously presented their plea

to open the city pools to the city government and learned a valuable lesson about how to get things accomplished in a community."

Erik Barbieri, the city's recreation superintendent, also lauded the girls.

"The girls I sat and spoke with truly had a passion for their cause. I congratulate them for following through on their plans and advocating for themselves and their fellow residents," Barbieri said. "Topics such as budgeting and politics are big issues to take on. Great work, girls!"

And the girls, while nervous at first, remain dedicated.

"If the pools do get opened, it will feel good," Burgos said. "Aside from that, it feels good that we worked this hard and we let our voices be heard."

Benitez agreed.

"We can make a big difference in our community," she said.

About the E-newsletter

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Salud America! The RWJF Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

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Salud America! is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The program aims to unite and increase the number of Latino scientists engaged in research on childhood obesity among Latinos to seek environmental and policy solutions to the epidemic. The network is directed by the Institute for Health Promotion Research at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio. For more information, [click here](#). To learn more about the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's efforts to combat childhood obesity, [click here](#).

Kids' Health Q&A

Question: How can you provide students in an afterschool program with physical activity opportunities and healthy snacks?

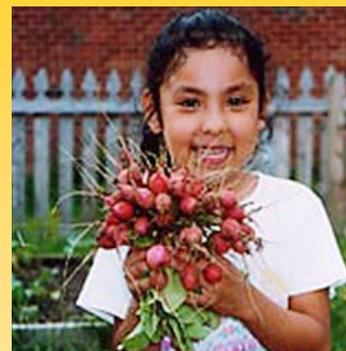
The answer could be an afterschool gardening club.

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation **reports** that gardening can instill a life-long passion for plants, a respect for the environment and new physical activity opportunities for many children.

The hands-on nature of gardening can enrich after-school curricula, improve students' interest in learning, provide physical activity opportunities, encourage students to eat healthier foods and provide them with time to develop social skills.

Other benefits of afterschool gardens include:

- promoting physical activity and quality outdoor experiences;
- motivating kids to eat and love fruits and vegetables;



- offering active and engaging connections to academics, from science and math to nutrition and literacy;
- teaching kids to nurture and care for other living things while developing patience; and
- giving kids a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

The National Gardening Association offers a **toolkit**, *Getting a Youth Garden Started*, which provides many grant opportunities and lesson ideas that can be implemented during afterschool academic enrichment or tutoring sessions.