National Organization Pursues Wellness as a Priority of African-American Community

By Lisa Gable

1963 was a critical year for African-Americans. Dr. Martin Luther King led the March on Washington. President John F. Kennedy called for a Civil Rights Act. African-American leaders throughout America intensified their organizing efforts aimed at strengthening their community, locally and nationally. One of those initiatives was the 100 Black Men, bringing together community leaders in New York to explore ways of improving conditions in their community (although they chose their name and shaped their national mandate years later).

Black History Month is a good time to mark the work of 100 Black Men of America. Their mission is to improve the quality of life in their communities. Their goal is to create environments where children are motivated to achieve. Their vision is one of intellectual development of youth and economic empowerment of the African-American community based on respect for family, spirituality, justice and integrity.

In pursuing these goals, 100 Black Men of America recognizes the importance of wellness, especially the need to combat childhood obesity. A member organization of the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation, one of the priorities of 100 Black Men of America is improving the health and overall wellbeing of young people through structured physical fitness training and wholesome food choices. The organization has made a strong commitment to energy balance – taking fewer calories-in and expending more calories out through physical activity.

100 Black Men of America is an excellent example of community leadership: Adults mentoring young people, transmitting values through a wide variety of community tools.

But battling obesity is not easy, especially in neighborhoods where recess and physical education classes have been cut back, leaving young people with few structured opportunities to burn off calories – or cost-cutting and safety concerns have led to the closing of parks and playgrounds, leaving kids with fewer unstructured opportunities.
In the face of these challenges, 100 Black Men’s dedicated vehicle for pursuing energy balance is called Youth Movement, a program that helps students improve their health, develop long-term goals and overcome obstacles and achieve lifetime success. The organization’s Chair for Health and Wellness, Dr. Mark Alexander, says that 100 Black Men provides an outlet for physical activity, along with nutritional education. “We start in the fall measuring body mass index (BMI) and testing each student’s aerobic capacity,” he says. “Typically only 25 percent of students meet national standards. The 100’s Youth Movement is changing those numbers, improving athletic performance and teaching life skills.”

Youth Movement’s efforts are comprehensive, and built on an extensive network of volunteers. Volunteer nurses and coaches bring equipment and assess health and fitness levels at participating schools. After-school and weekend programs – including track and field clubs, athletic training and clinics facilitated by Olympians and world-class athlete volunteers – provide opportunities for physical activities on a systematic basis.

The organization also has a clear, straightforward agenda.

- Develop sustainable school-based youth fitness programs in targeted neighborhoods.
- Improve fitness test scores of children in participating schools.
- Develop healthy food choice habits among youth.
- Establish youth athletic clubs in communities served by 100 Black Men.
- Promote academic success and enhance character development.

100 Black Men also brings a couple of other things to the table – a positive attitude, a comprehensive view, and long-term commitment. In the words of 100 Black Men Chairman Albert E. Dotson, Jr., “Among the many crises facing youth today is the lack of fitness and healthy food choices … As we change attitudes, beliefs and behaviors about exercise and nutrition today, we absolutely impact future generations.”

Black History Month is a time to pay tribute of the power of community to better lives. 100 Black Men, Inc. is harnessing the power of community. The organization’s effort to improve wellness and reduce obesity among young people is an important part of that.