

Youth advocates to battle obesity

By **Barbara Hollingsworth**

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Expanding waistlines on what should be Shawnee County's smallest residents drew together educators, health care providers, state officials and social service agencies on Wednesday.

The Junior League put on the "Healthy, Happy Me!" event to explore the growing problem of childhood obesity and what can be done to combat struggles with inactive children eating too much junk food.

"This issue of childhood obesity is kind of the 800-pound gorilla in the corner that nobody is willing to talk about," said Secretary of State Ron Thornburgh, who spoke at the event at the Pozez Education Center. "The problems are becoming more and more and more severe."

One in four high school students was overweight or at risk of becoming overweight last year, according to data provided by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. At the same time, one in three Kansas high school students spends three or more hours a day watching television.

During a panel discussion, speaker after speaker told of their jobs changing dramatically to address childhood obesity.

Topeka pediatrician Dr. Dennis Cooley said obesity among children has meant more cases of type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and hypertension in children.

"The affect of this is going to be dramatic," he said. "It is requiring a whole legion of pediatricians out there now to take care of these diseases."

A struggle, panelists said, is that there is little quantified evidence to show the best approach to combat obesity in children. But several groups have started programs.

Among them, Jennifer Church, nutrition and physical activity manager with KDHE, said a mid-week farmers market will begin operating next month on the south lawn of the Capitol to give parents affordable access to fruits and vegetables. The Capper Foundation Easter Seals is offering a pilot program "On the Ball for Fitness," which draws together parents and children in an exercise course using fitness balls.

Panelists said involving parents is key.

And Jodi Mackey, director of child nutrition and wellness with the Kansas State Department of Education, said her department, has several good programs, but it is unable to offer them to as many students as she would like.

"We have a thimble full of money to work with a bucket full of kids," Mackey said.

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