

Underprivileged youngsters to get healthy start with All Kids Can Play relaunch

Aurora is often seen as an affluent community, but all too many youngsters are facing financial situations that prevent them from taking part in organized sports.

Sport Aurora's All Kids Can Play program is once again hoping to help families bridge that gap with the re-launch of their All Kids Can Play program.

The All Kids Can Play Program, now in partnership with Welcoming Arms, was formally rebooted this week after its programming was put on the backburner following a re-think of their best practices after grant funding dried up.

According to organizers, the program has been retooled with improved public awareness programs, bolstered distribution to enable All Kids Can Play (AKCP) to invest even more in physical activity locally, and an improved program of fundraising to make sure their efforts are sustainable into the future.

It is hardly headline news today that kids spend too much time on their devices and not enough time running, jumping, or playing sports, say organizers. Schools only offer part of the solution, with 20 minutes of daily physical activity mandated in the elementary school curriculum, and according to ParticipACTION, only 35 per cent of children aged 5 to 17 are getting the required amount of physical activity to maintain health. But not all families can afford the cost of extracurricular activities, be they individual or team sports. Parents report in multiple surveys that the cost of sport participation is keeping one-third of Canadian youth off of fields and out of gyms.

Sport Aurora's Ron Weese elaborates that organizations like JumpStart, sponsored by Canadian Tire, have been working to address these needs, but more still needs to be done at the local level.

We did a little review of our program and we saw what was going on with Canadian Tire JumpStart, and we decided to relaunch the program, Mr. Weese tells The Auroran. One of our plans was to find partners to pull together more [young] recipients. It's a difficult thing to identify people who are without funds and maybe one or two kids have a hard time saying so and asking for help, so we went to Welcoming Arms, who see a lot of people, and asked what their [process] was, and they were similar to our own.

And a partnership was born. The AKCP program will now work with Welcoming Arms, the local charity spearheaded by seven local churches helping community members in need, regardless of religion, to connect with youth who might benefit from all the benefits play has to offer. Welcoming Arms was excited to partner with them, leading the vetting efforts, and AKCP in

turn was eager to point other families in need who come to them directly for sport assistance, in the direction of Welcoming Arms for additional help in making ends meet.

“If individuals make an application to Welcoming Arms, we will automatically accept them without having to go through another application process,” says Mr. Weese. “We’re streamlining this for people who are in hardship.”

The measure of success of this new partnership, he adds, will be twofold: attracting and distributing more funds.

“Before, it was kind of a difficult thing because we didn’t want to go out and advertise we had lots of money, because we didn’t have lots of money; what we wanted to do was work through our sport organizations and others who knew about us because we didn’t want to run out of funds,” he says. “Now, what we have, we think, is an opportunity to go out and look for more funds and more recipients. Up until now, we have only had a few individual [donors] who have believed in what we were doing. We’re not a recognized charity, so we couldn’t give receipts for income tax purposes, but as part of our workplan we’re hoping to do that in the New Year.

“The real importance of this program is not to help make kids athletes; the importance of this is so children who have been left on the sidelines because of financial difficulty have now been able to participate with their friends, because as much as physical activity and participating in sports is a valuable thing in and of itself, the real important thing that we heard from the recipients is the kids who joined the program and participated in the program got to have that real social relationship with other kids they went to school with, or kids on their block of people who they met. This is a thing that we do for kids to be involved in sport, but sport has a bigger context to it and it is really about removing the financial barriers so children can play and be a part of the whole play and social interaction. Parents have told us that their kids can now go out and play with their friends and maybe they couldn’t before.”

For more information on the All Kids Can Play program, visit www.sportaurora.ca.

By Brock Weir