



TAG in Action: The Power of One Volunteer Coach

As part of its national call to action, **Adolescent Health, Think, Act, Grow**® (TAG), the Office of Adolescent Health in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has identified a number of successful strategies for improving adolescent health. This includes our “Power of One” series about individual efforts to support young people.

The Inspiration

While on vacation in New York, Marc Berk, a volunteer baseball coach in Gaithersburg, Maryland, noticed that those who could not pay the requested fee at museums had to explain why. Berk realized that this process may feel demeaning to people who could not afford the fee, and he decided to look into the fee waiver process for youth sports in his community.

Taking Action

Having coached youth baseball for more than two decades, Berk believes deeply in the value of kids participating in sports that include all youth. In 1997 Berk donated his inheritance from his grandparents and created the Sam and Claire Rosen Sports Fund, a permanent fund that provides sports equipment, supplies, and associated fees to youth in need. Berk saw that this relatively small amount of flexible funding enabled the city to increase low-income youth’s participation in sports leagues.

Following the museum incident, Berk wondered if the \$40-\$50 registration fee for sports leagues created an additional barrier to youth participation. Drawing on his experience as a health policy researcher, Berk submitted a proposal to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to fund a small project to test whether simplifying the registration waiver process would increase participation. Although very different from his other studies, Berk believed this project was important to the youth in his community.

Making A Difference

Berk’s instincts were correct. A simple change to the waiver process, which permitted a family to request a waiver with no explanation, increased waiver requests by 1200 percent. Overall participation increased by 31 percent, and for children attending high-poverty schools, participation jumped nearly 80 percent. Furthermore, despite the lack of a verification process, there was little evidence of program abuse; 85 percent of residents still paid the full registration fee. Better yet, children who received the waivers had high rates of participation in games and practices.

Although this approach may not be feasible in all communities due to funding constraints or the need for accountability of public funds, Berk believes that other policies could increase participation in youth sports. For example, waiver policies can clearly state the likelihood of getting approved; waivers could be tied to other eligibility criteria such as free and reduced lunch; or applicants could be connected with a contact person, hopefully bilingual, to speak with about waivers. The benefits of such efforts are clear to Berk. As he explained, “There is nothing better than getting kids together on sports teams. It creates bonds, develops leadership skills, and supports both physical and mental health.”

