



Charlie Crist
Governor

Ana M. Viamonte Ros, M.D., M.P.H.
State Surgeon General

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 2009

Contact: CHOICES Health Education &
Wellness Program
(352) 334-8889

**STICKING TOGETHER AND REDUCING SIZE:
EFFECTIVE WEIGHT LOSS SUPPORT ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET**

GAINESVILLE – In Alachua County, 63.3 percent of adults are overweight or obese (Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2007, www.doh.state.fl.us/Disease_ctrl/epi/brfss/index.htm). Overweight and obesity are risk factors for virtually all chronic diseases, but behaviors associated with diet and physical activity are difficult to change. Public health professionals often hear clients regret that they know what behaviors they need to change but that they need more support and accountability in making those changes. Barriers to change often include low self-efficacy, poor family and peer support, incorrect attitudes or beliefs about weight loss, and the cost of weight loss programs.

In September 2008, the CHOICES Health Education and Wellness Program began a trial support group to address these barriers. After a three-month assessment and adjustment period, the program expanded to two sites: one in Gainesville and one in rural High Springs, Florida in January of 2009, with plans for further expansion.

The program is open to all residents of Alachua County at no cost. Each support group meets once a week at an easily accessible public building (currently a county office building and a branch library), to eliminate costs for room fees. Equipment is minimal: a digital scale, logbook, name tents, pens and foil stars, plus a large table and chairs.

Participant feedback to date has indicated lunchtime as the best time to meet. For working participants with families, mornings are hectic and evenings are time that participants wish to spend with their families. (Participants are encouraged to bring a bag lunch to meetings.) Rather than implementing a “diet plan,” the program focuses on adopting healthy habits one step at a time.

As participants arrive, they weigh in and record the results in the leader’s logbook. Individuals who have achieved weight loss that week add a foil star to their name tents. The meeting begins at 12:10 with a “check-in” with the group, followed by a short talk by the leader (a certified health educator and wellness coach) or a guest speaker. Most topics are selected by the participants. By 12:30, the group moves to facilitated discussion using coaching principles and frequently a goal-setting exercise for the coming week. The meeting closes at 12:50, although the instructor remains for individual discussion as needed.

Participants have indicated that they have lost weight at a healthy rate and have also provided positive feedback about the program. During the pilot period of September to December 2008, two participants reached a milestone of 5% of initial weight lost. From January to the present, three more have reached 5%. Aggregate weight loss for 2009 is listed below:



Charlie Crist
Governor

Ana M. Viamonte Ros, M.D., M.P.H.
State Surgeon General

January 2009	38 pounds
February 2009	43.5 pounds
March 2009	53 pounds

Participant feedback includes the following:

- “In my first week I cleaned out my kitchen cabinets of unhealthy foods and started eating healthier. Just weeks later, I got to clean out my closet and now fit in clothes I had outgrown. Thank you for your support!”
- “I enjoy our class on Wednesday very much. It gives me the encouragement that I need to lose the extra weight that I am carrying. You give many helpful hints, advice and also the best way to plan healthy meals. I went to a weight program for over a year, and I can honestly say I enjoy your class even more.”
- “I have been able to lose some weight, but most importantly, I have been able to keep it off. I am still working on my first 10 pounds, but I can't tell you how many times I have lost seven pounds and then gained it back before. This time, my weight loss is holding from week to week, and I am losing small increments. I am not counting calories. What a relief! I am practicing portion control, however, and I am exercising. I am creating a new lifestyle. I love it! Thank you for believing in me!”

National Women's Health Week is May 10-16. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health chose this year's theme as “It's Your Time,” to empower women to make their health a top priority. The nationwide initiative encourages women to take simple steps for a longer, healthier and happier life. For more information, visit www.womenshealth.gov/.

DOH promotes, protects and improves the health of all people in Florida. For more information about the Alachua County Health Department, visit www.doh.state.fl.us/chdAlachua/index.htm.

###