

July 27, 2005

California's first lady gets healthy dose of teens' input

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OAKLAND — California first lady Maria Shriver walked around East Oakland on Tuesday collecting teenagers' stories about the challenges they face in maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Carrying a clipboard, Shriver paid a three-hour visit to East Oakland's San Antonio district as part of her statewide Listening Tour on Health, Nutrition and Activity.

For the past month, Shriver has been soliciting input from youths throughout the state to learn about their health problems. Her foray to the East Bay Asian Youth Center and San Antonio Park gave her the chance to take questions from youths in an urban setting.

In a round-table discussion at the center, students brought up concerns ranging from a shortage of fresh fruit in school cafeterias to adolescent diabetes.

"Basically, when you go to school, you want something that will make you feel good," said Skyline High School senior Julio Maciel, 16.

Other students agreed that nutritious food is hard to come by in school.

"One-quarter of the teenagers in this state are overweight," Shriver said, noting that poor nutrition and obesity are expensive propositions. "It's costing the state billions of dollars."

When it comes to proper nutrition, "I have trouble with my own children," Shriver said. "It affects all of us." She is also an avid reader of nutritional books such as "The Portion Teller," which links growing serving sizes to growing waistlines.

After the discussion, Shriver walked around the neighborhood, paying a visit to a liquor store and Cycles for Change, a local nonprofit organization dedicated to getting young people involved in riding and fixing bicycles.

Mayor Jerry Brown's wife, Anne, and City Councilmember Patricia Kernighan joined the first lady's stroll. Students crowded around Shriver on the sidewalk, taking turns complaining about a dearth of activity centers and the ubiquity of fast-food chains in the area.

"It's not just a problem in Oakland, but in Los Angeles and Sacramento, too," Shriver said. "It takes a lot of talking to get people to slowly change, but the good news is that companies are interested."

After her statewide tour is completed, Shriver plans to present her findings at the Governor's Summit on Health, Nutrition and Obesity on Sept. 15. Meanwhile, the students who spoke with the first lady are excited she is showing concern about their generation's growing health problems.

A 14-year-old Castlemont High School freshman, Tonika Allen, says there is plenty of blame to go around.

"We are all part of the problem," she said. "I'm glad ... (Shriver's) really into what we're into ... so we can become part of the solution."

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