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Response overwhelming to Cleveland Clinic, YMCA, Curves collaboration that offers free 3-month memberships

By Sarah Jane Tribble, The Plain Dealer
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Response to the Cleveland Clinic's offer of free three-month membership at YMCAs in Greater Cleveland to help the public get fit for the new year has been overwhelming.

The influx comes after the organization, along with the Cleveland Clinic, Curves and other program sponsors announced last month that they were offering the free memberships this year to all Cuyahoga County adults.

So far, more than 15,500 people have taken the first step and registered online for the goFit! program at either a YMCA or Curves branch. Of those, 4,500 people have completed registration in person.

"The really good news is the program has at least captured the interest and raised the awareness of physical fitness, exercise and health," said Jennie Geise, director of Wellness for Curves International. The YMCA, Curves and the Clinic say county residents can still

enroll before Jan. 31 -- but their free membership may not begin immediately. While Curves branches are booking appointments for the required initial assessment within a week, most YMCA branches have waiting lists that stretch into February.



More than 15,500 people have responded to online registration since the Cleveland Clinic last month offered free three-month membership to YMCAs and Curves International branches. The overwhelming response has heartened area fitness and health experts who created the program, but it also highlights an underlying need in a region suffering from high obesity rates and poor access to exercise facilities.

"I don't think anybody thought it would be as high," said Cuyahoga County Health Commissioner Terry Allan. "The discussion should evolve into 'how do we keep them there?' What are the opportunities and what are some best practices that will keep them there beyond the New Year's resolution. . . I think people really want to make a change and asking them what will keep them there might be a useful opportunity."

Mike Caprina, corporate membership director for the Greater Cleveland YMCA said that 65 percent of the people who join the gym stay members after six months. People who participate in a more defined workout program have an even higher retention rate, he said.

The YMCA had initially calculated that it could host an additional 1,200 new people as part of the program. Already, about 3,000 have completed enrollment at YMCA branches.

Sharon Williams braved frigid, snowy conditions Monday evening to stop by the downtown YMCA and sign up. There was a steady stream of people at the front desk for the same reason and Williams was told she would be called when a spot was available.

"It's a little inconvenient, but it's a free program," the Berea resident said with a shrug, adding that she'll start when she can because "I need to get fit."

Karen Goerndt, who lives in Euclid, went to the Euclid YMCA branch recently to sign up, but workers there told her to go to another YMCA branch if she wanted to participate immediately, or she could put her name on a waiting list.

"I am trying to lose weight so badly," Goerndt said. "I'm definitely what they call obese. I don't like it and I want to be around for a long time. I've got grandchildren."

The sponsors do not check the financial status of the registrants; instead they ask only that an enrollee not have been involved with another gym in the previous 90 days.

All participants in the program must do an initial in-person assessment during which a fitness counselor, some of whom are provided by the Cleveland Clinic, measures their weight, height, hips and waist. Participants must commit to working out three times a week and participate in weekly, as well as monthly, weigh-ins.

"We wanted personal responsibility here," said Kate Nagel, director of the Department of Public Health & Research at the Cleveland Clinic.

The Clinic plans to track overall progress of enrollees -- while keeping individual information private. The goal is to collect data on weight loss and commitment levels, Nagel said.

Geise, who has worked at Curves for eight years, said working out three times a week as a good way to start any fitness program.

"It's doable and that's one of the most important aspects of starting a new exercise program," she said. "You don't want to overwhelm yourself."