

Just call it 'the Y' as YMCA unveils new logo and revitalized brand

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By: [Anne Polta](#), West Central Tribune

WILLMAR — So you've always called it "the Y," even though you know the correct, official name is "YMCA."

You're now doing it right. The YMCA organization of the United States has undergone a major makeover of its brand, emerging with a new and shortened name, a colorful new logo and a heightened emphasis on the Y's role in community health and well-being.

"The new branding is really a communication system for the Y," said Tom Bolin, associate executive director of the Kandiyohi County Area Family Y. "We really want to talk about what these things will do for you and your family."

The new logo and brand, which promote youth development, social responsibility and healthy living, will be officially introduced at the local Y at an open house Saturday from 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.

The public is invited to visit, tour the Y and learn more about what programs are available, said Bolin and executive director Theresa Wittenberg.

"People from the community can come free of charge that day and use the pool and gym," Bolin said.

The last time the national Y went through a major revitalization of its brand was in 1967. The 43-year-old logo that's being replaced was among the most recognized in the world, second only to McDonald's golden arches.

The change was announced back in July but individual Ys are being given up to five years to fully implement it.

For the Kandiyohi County Area Family YMCA, the rebranding comes at an opportune time. Over the past few years the local Y, with 5,500 members, has been building its capacity to offer programs that promote community wellness, often in partnership with other community and even state entities.

Take the tomatoes and zucchini lying on a table in the entrance. They were grown in the children's garden at the Y, an initiative that introduces local youngsters to the taste of fresh vegetables and the physical activity involved in growing them. Each year the program gets larger. Some of the proceeds from selling the homegrown produce have gone to the Dominican Republic to support youth development programs.

The garden has been so successful that other Ys are taking notice, Bolin said. "We get lots of calls from around the nation."

Or take the Diabetes Prevention Program, a new national effort through UnitedHealth Group to reduce the incidence of type 2 diabetes in the U.S.

The Y in Willmar is one of only a handful in the United States selected for the program, which will focus on coaching, weight loss, physical activity and healthful eating to prevent high-risk people from developing diabetes. Previous studies suggest this approach can cut the likelihood of diabetes among these individuals by as much as half. In what organizers hope will become a national model, UnitedHealth will cover the participants' costs.

The Willmar Y already had a track record in diabetes prevention programs, Wittenberg said. The site here was one of the pilot sites for a group coaching model being evaluated by the Minnesota Department of Health.

The new DPP, which also has the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as one of its partners, will help the local Y continue and build upon cost-effective efforts to reduce type 2 diabetes, Wittenberg said. "The nice part of that is that it will be reimbursable."

The Willmar Y is embarking as well on another new initiative known as Action Communities for Health, Innovation and Environmental Change, or ACHIEVE. Forty cities, including Willmar, were chosen earlier this year to develop local strategies for community health through system and policy changes. The effort is focused on physical activity, nutrition, tobacco cessation, obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Bolin said it will be a three-year project. An assessment is currently under way to collect baseline data and help identify priorities.

"We're still in the formative stages," he said. "There's lots of different options. We just have to figure out where we're going to work."

Although the Y will continue to be known for "gym-and-swim," the new brand will help strengthen its position as a key player on behalf of community wellness, he said. "That's our motto now: making the healthy choice the easy choice."

"We want to make it fun," Wittenberg agreed. "It's about taking small steps — eating better, moving more."

Wittenberg said she recently encountered a woman in the Y gym who told her, "This is the best place to be in Willmar if you want to get healthy and lose weight."

"There's all kinds of stories like that," Wittenberg said.