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Flu scare, weather don't stop 5K benefit Charities raise funds for underprivileged county kids

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Even after some government officials just cautioned parents not to allow their children to congregate in large crowds or venture outside the home to prevent swine flu from spreading, more than 500 local children and adults weren't afraid to put their sneakers on and head out the door yesterday.

Before 8 a.m., families and friends started stretching their muscles and lining up at the Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium for the 5K KidWalk, organized by six Annapolis charities. It was the partnership's first attempt at such a fund-raising event.

The money will be divvied among the Boys & Girls Clubs of Anne Arundel County, Light House homeless shelter, Anne Arundel CASA, Vision Workshops, Box of Rain and We Care & Friends to benefit local underprivileged youth.

Though event coordinators won't know how much they raised until they do a final count of all the funds, children under 12 contributed a minimum \$10 donation and adults gave a minimum of \$25.

Regardless of the final tally, organizers said they're proud of what they've accomplished.

In just five months, the non-profits were able to organize the event - the first of many they hope to develop, volunteers said. But more than just that, they hope the public visibility of the groups as a united front will take them a step forward in providing for the community.



Paul W. Gillespie

The Capital Walkers start the 5K KidWalk at Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium.

As the walkers exited the stadium's gates, a bagpiper blared a jaunty song to get their feet moving. Soon the participants were headed down Clay

Street, along Calvert Street, then up West Street and Smithville Street, passing the Light House shelter and the Boys & Girls Club on their way.

Elizabeth Kinney, the incoming president of the Light House, said the route for the walk was intentionally planned to travel past the agencies' locations.

Moreover, some 3,000 children live within the area designated in the walk, said Ed Gosselin, a board member for the Boys and Girls Club. Many of the children who attend the club call that downtown neighborhood "home" - including many of the children who were walking yesterday.

"This event really brings together all of these groups that help disadvantaged kids in a united coverage," Gosselin said.

Young walkers, such as 8-year-old Makien Culley, were in sunny spirits despite the overcast sky and spotty drizzles.

Makien, a Southgate Elementary School student, hopped up and down the curb as he rounded Clay Street, with his five cousins and aunt nearby in the pack.

Though getting up early on a Saturday isn't usually how he likes his weekends to begin, he said, it didn't take him long before he was palling around with his friends and cousins that morning.

"It's really fun," he said, laughing. "But it was hard 'cause I was really tired this morning."

But lucky little Connor Norris, 17 months, didn't have to fully wake up to participate. Dad, Lee Norris, and mom, Sheila Norris, a teacher at Tyler Heights Elementary School, pushed Connor's stroller along the route.

Sheila Norris said she joined the KidWalk as part of a 19-member team from Tyler Heights.

"(The teachers) like to pick a lot of charities that benefit our students. It's just our way to show our collective support for the kids," she said. "And I'm noticing, especially in these economic times, a lot more of my students are needing help."

It's a cause that many people felt moved to join.

Andre Wells, a veteran who manually pushes his own wheelchair, exercised his biceps by wheeling up the incline of West Street.

"I'm being supportive of my friend here," Wells said, gesturing to Meade Village director Kenny Belt. "Plus, this is good training for me. Are my arms getting bigger?"