

Achieving *Goodness* in Community Health

By Chris Palmedo and David Rebanal

Eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Eat breakfast. Eat a variety of foods. Eat fewer foods that are high in fat. And don't forget to exercise. After all, exercise helps improve your mood, combats disease and helps you manage your weight.

We've all heard these messages before. While sometimes the messages might change (for instance, coffee is a concern one year, then the next year it's reported as heart-healthy), the basic messages are the same – eat better and not so much, exercise more, don't smoke and don't drink excessive alcohol.

Why then are so many health indicators getting worse for so many of our communities?

- ☞ More than 60% of Oregon adults are overweight or obese.
- ☞ Obesity costs Oregon at least \$781 million per year in direct medical expenses.
- ☞ One in fifteen adult Oregonians has been diagnosed with diabetes. This is higher than the national average.
- ☞ Today's adolescents might be the first generation to grow up less healthy than their parents.

What gives? Clearly, there's no shortage of health information and medical technology is available to help people who need health care. But research shows that even medical care doesn't make us healthy. It makes sick people better, but it doesn't make an unhealthy population healthier.

For that, we need broad laws, policies and programs. These kinds of efforts could include, for example, nutrition and breastfeeding education for new moms, assistance for people to quit smoking, physical education in schools and requiring fast-food restaurants to post calorie counts on menus.

Northwest Health Foundation has started an initiative to raise awareness of community health needs and asks for input on how to best prioritize good health among all Oregon communities.

The project is called "Community Health Priorities" and, along with a blog that encourages people to explore ideas for

the best ways to make our state healthier, it encourages activism, civic engagement and greater awareness of health for everyone – not just the people who read health magazines.

For example, if we already have a good idea about activities we can do as individuals to be healthier — like eating more vegetables and exercising more — what are the activities we can do as a society or a community to make everyone healthier?

We asked these questions on our Web site. Here is some of what we've heard so far:

- ☞ Increase public investments in school-based health centers that can help prevent obesity, depression, drug use and smoking among kids.
- ☞ Expand nutrition education programs, particularly in conjunction with school-based gardens and farm-to-school programs.
- ☞ Increase investments in plentiful and safe pedestrian and bike routes, ideally separated from roads, not just painted lanes on the roads.
- ☞ Introduce parks to park-less neighborhoods, along with more "green belts" that can be used by pedestrians and bike commuters.
- ☞ Provide adequate funding for mental health programs. When this need is neglected, significant and expensive problems arise.
- ☞ Increase the regulation of pesticides, herbicides and other toxic chemicals.
- ☞ Increase funding to prevent domestic and sexual violence, which greatly impacts individuals' emotional, physical and mental health for entire lifetimes.

While most health-related information today is focused on individuals and individual choices, Community Health Priorities is trying to emphasize the influence that our societal environment has on those health choices. After all, when we work toward a healthier community, we're working toward a better state of health for all of us.

Along with maintaining their own health, it's important for individuals to speak out to city, county, state and even federal government leaders. If you personally ask one of your elected representatives to fund the farm-to-school program or to increase the public investment in bike paths, you are potentially increasing the capacity of your local farms and increasing the infrastructure of your local bike path network – which will ultimately make it easier for you to be a healthier person.

To join the conversation about your wishes for healthier communities, visit community-healthpriorities.org.



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