
Prevention is the best medicine

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act -- otherwise known as health care reform -- was passed last year. As part of its prevention focus, the legislation created a National Prevention Council chaired by the Surgeon General and including the heads of 17 federal agencies and charged the council with crafting a National Prevention Strategy that would lead to a healthier nation.

The new strategy was released this month. To find out more about it and how it might affect local efforts to create a healthier Santa Cruz County, Leslie Conner, program and policy director of the Health Improvement Partnership HIP of Santa Cruz County, had a conversation with Leslie Goodfriend, senior health services manager for Santa Cruz County's Health Services Agency.

HIP is a countywide collaborative of health, foundation and government leaders dedicated to increasing access to care and building a stronger health care delivery system in Santa Cruz County.

Here is an edited version of their conversation.

LC: How did the National Prevention Strategy become part of health care reform?

LG: It reflects decades of growing awareness that good health is about a lot more than quality medical care. Medical care and treatment are important, but it makes a lot more sense to stop diseases before they start.

If we can do a better job of preventing disease, then we also have a better shot at lowering health care costs, improving the quality of care and giving more people access to health coverage. That's the connection to health care reform, but it's also true that better health has real benefits for individuals, communities and the economy overall. Healthy kids don't miss as much school and learn better; healthy adults are more productive; and healthy seniors are more independent -- just to name a few examples.

LC: What are some of the strategy's main goals? How does it put prevention on the front burner?

LG: The overall goal is to increase the number of Americans who are healthy at every stage of life. We get there by engaging every sector of society and supporting them with evidence-based recommendations for what they can do. For example, businesses can be part of building healthier environments for their employees by promoting physical activity. Clinics can make it easier for patients to receive routine preventive care.

In almost every community and setting, we can put policies in place that make healthy options the default mode -- the easy, affordable choice and therefore the more likely choice.

LC: What are the implications for states and counties like ours?

LG: We're already working on many of the plan's seven priority areas, which focus on helping people change the behaviors that take the biggest toll -- in terms of preventable pain, suffering, early death and costs.

The areas are tobacco-free living, active living, preventing drug abuse and excessive alcohol use, healthy eating, injury and violence-free living, reproductive and sexual health, and mental and emotional wellbeing.

If we can work together to make healthier choices easier for people across those areas, individuals will be much better off -- and so will the health system and the economy, in Santa Cruz County and elsewhere.

For more information about the National Prevention Strategy, visit www.HealthCare.gov/center/councils/nphpphc