

Christina Cuevas, Leslie Goodfriend, Poki Namkung: Taking a broader view of health

In 1946, the World Health Organization WHO tried to define health more broadly than what happens inside the walls of a clinic or hospital. "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being," states the preamble to WHO's constitution, "and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

We know from our own lives and from our work in public health that physical and mental health are determined by many factors outside a doctor's office. For example, people who live in safe neighborhoods have many more opportunities to walk, bike or go to local parks for exercise than people who don't. Grocery stores in poor communities offer a limited amount and variety of fresh produce, and more fast food and liquor stores per block. And educational achievement and income levels have been linked to a wide variety of differences in health outcomes, from infant mortality to heart disease to diabetes. These, in turn, affect every other sector, including our economy.

Consider this: low-income, less educated adults in their 30s and 40s have rates of illness that are comparable to affluent adults who are decades older, in their 60s and 70s. American businesses lose over \$1 trillion each year to lost productivity linked to chronic illness.

Connecting the dots between all these factors and the health status of individuals and communities is complicated. Last year, with the help of the Health Improvement Partnership, we convened a Health Equities Group representing different sectors in our community -- health, education, philanthropy, parks and recreation, and legal services -- to discuss these issues and find ways to close the health-related gaps and disparities in our county.

A great tool for understanding and exploring these issues is the PBS documentary series "Unnatural Causes," which poses the question: "Is inequality making us sick?" The Health Equities Group is sponsoring discussion sessions about health inequities around the county, including showing the documentary. If you're interested in hearing more about these sessions and how your organization can participate, please contact Leslie Goodfriend, 454-4313.

We're also learning from what others are doing. Successful programs like the Harlem Children's Zone that link health and education, starting at birth and continuing through college, are showing promising results -- so much so that the Obama Administration will soon be funding 20 "Promise Neighborhoods" throughout the country to replicate this approach in other settings.

The Health Equities Group also will be collecting data about how inequities in health are distributed around the county, neighborhood by neighborhood, to help us focus on our own "Children's Zones" to reduce disparities and improving health and well-being.

Through these dialogues and by exploring what others are doing across the country, we hope to mobilize Santa Cruz County residents to become more involved in creating economic, education, and other opportunities that are the ultimate key to good health. When we look at health as so much more than the absence of disease, as the World Health Organization suggests, we can see that housing policies, education policies, transportation policies, anti-violence policies -- all of these are really health policies, too, and they affect each and every one of us.

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