

Leaders to take on health divide in the Coachella Valley

Written by Tatiana Sanchez The Desert Sun
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Dr. Gilbert Grio (left) and dental student Mike Britting prepare to work on Indio resident Jose Vasquez's teeth during The Flying Doctors Clinic in Thermal on Saturday, September 28, 2013. / Richard Lui/The Desert Sun

On Tuesday's panel

- Dr. Holly Andersen, Attending Cardiologist and Director of Education & Outreach at the Ronald O. Perelman Heart Institute at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center
- Notah Begay III, President, NB3 Foundation
- Janet Marguia, President and CEO, National Council of La Raza
- Wendell Pierce, Actor and President of Sterling Farms
- Robert K. Ross, President & CEO, The California Endowment

Among celebrity-studded fitness events, neighborhood activities, and health and

wellness seminars, one of the main focuses of this year's Health Matters conference is to bridge the persisting health divide in the U.S.

This divide is greatly illustrated in the eastern Coachella Valley, where there is just one doctor per 9,000 patients — well above the norm of one per 2,000 — and where limited education, extreme poverty and no access to health insurance have led to high obesity and diabetes rates, among other chronic health concerns.

Though in recent years local and federal resources have increased their efforts to aid these underprivileged populations, communities such as the eastern Coachella Valley continue to experience a severe lack of health resources.

A group of health leaders will discuss Tuesday how to bridge this long-standing divide.

The panel titled, "Closing the Great Health Divide in the United States," will include five health professionals.

"The eastern Coachella Valley probably faces the steepest of community health challenges than any region in the state. I think it's a combination of poverty and environmental health issues, (along with) immigration," said panelist Dr. Robert Ross, president and CEO of the California Endowment, a private, statewide health foundation that aims to expand access to affordable and quality health care to underprivileged communities.

Ross, a pediatrician and public health professional, said the conditions of a community play a significant role in determining health outcomes.

"The most critical connection to understand and to attack is the relationship between a

community, its environmental conditions and chronic disease,” Ross said. “Most Americans ... when they think of health and health systems, they naturally think of hospitals and health clinics and health insurance. They really need to be thinking about their communities and about their neighborhoods.”

From this concept came the California Endowment’s “Building Healthy Communities” in 2010, a 10-year, \$1 billion plan in which residents in 14 underprivileged communities throughout California work to revitalize their neighborhoods.

The eastern Coachella Valley was hand-picked as one of these communities, along with Boyle Heights, East Oakland, Richmond and Sacramento, among others.

“Even though there’s so much available land in the east valley and in the Inland Empire, what about available land for recreation parks for these people? And what about clean and fresh water for people to drink? Proper sewage? The range and challenges of issues that the community faces is really critical,” Ross said.

Missions such as the Flying Doctors of America aim to bridge the health divide most seen in the dilapidated mobile home parks and crowded waiting rooms of the east valley.

The annual clinic is held in Thermal where doctors, nurses, dentists and chiropractors — all volunteers — offer free medical treatment to residents. Though the clinic regularly visits underprivileged regions in Mexico, Central and South America, the Coachella Valley is the only stop in the U.S. made by the Flying Doctors.

Health leaders were expecting up to 1,000 people for the Flying Doctors’ most recent visit in September, but the clinic saw an estimated 2,000 patients — the largest number in the valley to date.

The amount of residents that flock to the clinic each year is a testament to the severe doctor shortage in the Coachella Valley.

“We have to increase our provider pool,” said Dr. Randolph Gibbs, a family practitioner at the Mecca Medical Clinic on Avenue 66.

Gibbs has spent 32 years as a family practice physician.

What the community needs most, according to Gibbs, is a higher volume of consultants and health care providers available to people in the east valley, which would ultimately lead to timelier diagnoses and quicker treatment.

“With the new Affordable Care Act, we’re hoping there will be more people on this side of the valley that will help us out,” he said.

In the past year, the Clinton Foundation’s Health Matters Initiative also has reached into much of the forgotten areas of the Coachella Valley in an effort to fulfill objectives within its 45-goal blueprint, which include reducing substance-abuse morbidity and increasing the number of health care providers in current shortage areas.

One of the main objectives of the initiative is to combat obesity.

More than one-third of U.S. adults are obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Nationwide, however, obesity rates didn't worsen for the first time in fifteen years, according to health rankings released in December.

In the Coachella Valley, the most recent figures from the Health Assessment Resource Center from 2010 show 56.6 percent, or about 186,823 people, were overweight or obese.

In addition, a greater percentage of Latinos ages 18 and older reported having "fair" or "poor" health than whites, according to the resource center.

But obesity rates remain high among U.S. Latinos.

An estimated 78 percent of Mexican American women are overweight or obese, as compared to only 60.3 of non-Hispanic White women, according to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Office of Minority Health.

In 2011, Hispanics were 1.2 times as likely to be obese than non-Hispanic Whites. About 99 percent of the east valley's population is Latino, according to the most recent data from the California Endowment.

"The Clinton Foundation has done terrific and fabulous work around obesity prevention. They understand that environmental and community choices are critical in addressing the epidemic of obesity," said Ross, of the California Endowment. "I think them having a presence in the east valley is a fabulous game changer."