



Newsmaker: Dietitian directs efforts to measure community health

Eileen Packer has been director of Healthcare Assessment Resource Center since its inception

Eileen Packer has been executive director of HARC (the Healthcare Assessment Resource Center) since it was founded in 2006.

A registered dietitian and certified association executive, Packer began her career as director of food and nutrition services at Tarzana Regional Medical Center. After 11 years there, she took the CEO reins at the 7,000-member California Dietetic Association in Los Angeles. She restructured the organization and its foundation during her decade-plus tenure there, restoring profitability and building a reserve fund to sustain future outreach.

Packer moved to the Coachella Valley in 2000, serving in various management positions for the county's Office on Aging. Three years later, the Stroke Recovery Center hired her as executive director. She is a member of Gilda's Club Medical Resource Council.

QUESTION: 1. The Health Resource

Assessment Center was established in 2006 and you have been the executive director since the beginning. How did the idea get started?

ANSWER: HARC was developed by a collaboration of agencies and individuals in the Coachella Valley and eastern Riverside County in response to a clear scarcity of objective, independent, timely and comprehensive health needs data.

The Desert Healthcare Foundation was awarded a \$200,000 grant by the California Wellness Foundation to establish a regional data collection system. The foundation chose to use those funds to form a broad-based collaborative of interested organizations and allow this collaborative to create the desired system. From the community-based beginning, HARC was born.

The 2010 Community Health Monitor found that more than 100,000 valley adult residents lack health insurance, up from just more than 80,000 in 2007. Does

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knowing this data help address the problem?

The data showed that the increase in those who lack health insurance rose from 14.8 percent to 20.5 percent of the adult population.

This increase is a statistically significant difference between the years, sending an alert to the community that the situation has worsened.

The value of repeating the assessment every three years identifies the areas that have changed as demonstrated by health care coverage.

This information provides the funders and service providers the information needed to create programs and services that address the identified problem.

As an example, a person diagnosed with cancer who does not have health care coverage is probably unable to pay for treatment. By using HARC data, a nonprofit organization whose mission it is to cover the cost of health care for those diagnosed with cancer would be more likely to successfully gain the grant funding necessary to allow this and other local cancer patients to be treated.

Your 2010 survey found that while the valley has a high level of hunger, it also has a high level of obesity, which seems contradictory. Can you explain that?

With a strong economy, hunger was not

deemed a high priority when developing the questions for the 2007 needs assessment. That changed in 2010, when the HARC Steering Committee recognized the importance of adding food insecurity questions.

The 2010 data showed that in the prior 12 months, more than 67,000 adult residents in eastern Riverside County cut the size of their meal or skipped a meal because of lack of money and more than 43,000 required emergency food. Yet there are more than 283,000 adults in eastern Riverside County who are either overweight or obese.

Households with limited resources to buy enough food often purchase cheap, energy-dense foods that are filling, trying to maximize their calories per dollar in order to stave off hunger. Those who have high levels of hunger may also overeat when food does become available, resulting in ups and downs in food intake that can contribute to weight gain.

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With a weak economy and governments struggling with budgets, how concerned are you about maintaining funding for HARC?

HARC has been fortunate to have the support of many local and state level funders during the past five years. Our efforts to reach out to new funders have been a struggle, as HARC is in a unique position of not providing direct program services, but rather supporting those organizations and agencies that do. Competition for dollars from funders has increased, so the coming years will require persistence and creativity for sustainability.

To build capacity, HARC initiated programs to provide research services, needs assessments, program evaluations and data training for nonprofits, government agencies and educational institutions.

The income generated from these services has grown substantially over the past two years. HARC will continue to offer this expanded spectrum of services, further enhancing its value to the community.

As a dietitian with a long career of educating the public on healthy eating, are you surprised that the message never seems to get through?

No, but I do see a light in the window. The repetitive promulgation of the unhealthy status of our children and their shorter life expectancy may be a wake up for parents to make healthier life choices, which includes food and exercise.

New guidelines released last month and endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that children as young as 9 age be tested for high cholesterol as a way to prevent heart disease in later life.

The panel also suggests diabetes screening every two years starting as early as 9 for children who are overweight and have other risks for Type 2 diabetes, including a family history. HARC 2010 data show that 58.5 percent of local adults and 41.6 percent of children 2 to 17 are overweight or obese, mirroring the problem throughout the U.S.

Do you have a suggestion for the Monday Newsmaker feature? Email Community Conversations Editor James Folmer at james.folmer@thedesertsun.com or call (760) 778-4625.

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Eileen Packer, executive director of the Health Resource Assessment Center for Newsmaker, Tuesday, November 29, 2011. Michael Snyder, The Desert Sun

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