



# Editorial: Health care needs secure funding

Written by

**The Desert Sun Editorial Board**

7:15 PM, Apr. 23, 2011|

The new health care assessment of Eastern Riverside County serves as a reminder of how important it is to continue the many initiatives that have been launched in the past few years.

The finding that one in five Coachella Valley residents lacks health insurance — a dramatic increase from three years ago — tells us the mission is more important than ever.

## Modest progress

Since Volunteers in Medicine opened a free clinic in Indio in November, demand has been so strong that its leaders are calling for more volunteer doctors and nurse practitioners.

Recognizing that Desert Hot Springs has the most extreme shortage of primary care physicians — one for every 9,400 residents while the federal standard is one for every 2,000 — the Borrego Community Health Foundation opened a health center in September. It also is refurbishing and expanding the former Jewish community

center on Pierson Boulevard. Construction on the \$5 million project will begin soon and take about nine months to complete, said Lenny Pepper, director of special programs and projects for the Desert Healthcare District.

The most important part of the equation is the opening of the UCR School of Medicine, planned for 2012. Dean Richard Olds plans to work with Coachella Valley hospitals and clinics to get more primary care physicians working in the valley.

## The bad news

The Health Assessment Resource Center (HARC) conducted its first health survey in 2007. The second triennial report, released on April 14, tells us what you might expect. By many measures, the recession made things worse:

- More than 106,000 residents (20.5 percent) did not have health insurance in 2010. In 2007, fewer than 35,000 (14.8

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percent) lacked insurance. Latinos were three times more likely to be uninsured than whites.

- The number of adults needing to put food on the table doubled.
- Only about two-thirds of adults saw a health care provider in the 2010 survey. Previously, about three-fourths of us made it to a doctor.

Putting off health care can have serious consequences, according to Glen Grayman, president of HARC. If detected early, diseases can be treated. If not, patients often end up in the emergency room, increasing the health care burden on taxpayers.

### The good news

While much of the news was bad, there were signs of hope:

- The percentage of residents without a high school education dropped from 16.3 percent in 2007 to 9.5 percent. Also, the percentage of adults with a college degree rose from 21.3 percent to 27.6 percent.

Education is one of the most important indicators of better health because high school and college graduates are more likely to have jobs with health insurance and other benefits.

- Most significantly, the percentage of children 6 to 11 without health insurance declined from 19 percent three years ago

to 5.9 percent.

However, more than two-thirds of the children rely on publicly funded health insurance, such as California's Children's Health Insurance Program. More than three-quarters of Latino children rely on public health insurance.

If the state Legislature's budget negotiations lead to cuts in programs such as Healthy Families and Medi-Cal for Children, that could have a significant impact on the health of Coachella Valley children.

### Health care district for east valley worth considering

The Desert Healthcare District was created in 1948 as part of a statewide effort to create acute-care hospitals. It founded Desert Regional Medical Center and now distributes about \$3 million in grants and programs a year.

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However, the 457-square-mile district ends at Cook Street in Palm Desert. The eastern half of the valley has no such health care district.

Grayman, who also serves on the Desert Healthcare District board, has advocated a health care district for the east valley for years — either an expansion of the current district or creating a new east valley district.

“We can talk all day long about bringing in new health care practitioners, but the only way we can effectively do that is to have adequate funding to pay the practitioners,” he said.

### **Understand the problem and then take action**

Creating HARC was a brilliant first step in solving the Coachella Valley's health care crisis. First, we must understand the scope of the problem.

But the next step is more important — taking action. The federal government recently reduced funding the Federally Qualified Health Centers. And if California doesn't put the tax extensions on the ballot, it would be a surprise if state health programs aren't cut.

The average homeowner in the Desert Healthcare District pays \$23.53 a year in property taxes to support it. As much as we disdain taxes, this is not a heavy burden.

Dr. Grayman is right. Talking about the

problem doesn't solve it. The east valley must not be treated like a Third World country. We must provide a secure funding mechanism to improve the health of the entire Coachella Valley.

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