

We're assessing the health of our valley

What is the status of the health of our community? How will we know if it has changed after new programs, services or policies are implemented? How does our health status compare locally, statewide or nationally? It's crucial to know the answers to these questions, as health care begins to change with the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. Provisions of the Affordable Care Act began in 2010, with final implementation scheduled for 2015.



Eileen Packer

The survey includes important areas of health and wellness for adults and children, such as access to health care (presence of insurance, type of insurance, reasons for lack of insurance, etc.), chronic illness (diabetes, cancer, and asthma, etc.), mental health (depression, anxiety, and phobia, etc.), preventative screening (mammography, colonoscopy, and cholesterol screenings, etc.) and health behaviors (smoking alcohol consumption, and exercise, etc.). The demographic data allow the identification of health disparities along several key variables, such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, education and income level.

The results of the data collection are provided to the community free of charge via the HARC website. Based on the needs and gaps identified by the HARC data, local nonprofits, researchers and health experts create programs and services that positively impact the health of our residents. Local organizations who cited HARC data in their funding requests received more than \$4.7 million to support current or new programs.

As a triennial survey, assessments have been conducted in 2007 and 2010. The time has come to begin the collection of the 2013 data. Kent State University, a HARC subcontractor, will be calling Coachella Valley residents January through April of this year. Because HARC strives to ensure the data represent the entire community, it is exceedingly important that individuals from all walks of life participate. The results of the survey will be shared with the community in early 2014.

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Here is a review of some of the changes made by the Affordable Care Act:

» In 2010, the act required insurance companies to provide preventative care and to allow children up to 26 years of age to stay on their parents' insurance — \$15 billion were designated in a preventive fund to keep Americans healthy.

» In 2012, the act encouraged integrated health systems to collect data to reduce health disparities.

» In 2013, there will be new funding for state Medicaid (Medi-Cal) programs that include preventive care and additional funding for children in the Children's Health Insurance Program.

» In 2014, those earning less than 133 percent of the federal poverty guidelines will be eligible to enroll in Medi-Cal. Just recently, the federal government approved California's health benefit exchange, whose mission is to increase the number of those insured, improve health care quality, lower costs, and reduce health disparities.

» In 2015, to improve quality and lower costs, physicians will be paid based on value, not volume.

Coachella Valley residents can rest assured that there is a mechanism to measure the health impact of the above Affordable Care Act mandates.

The nonprofit Health Assessment Resource Center (HARC) was created in 2006 to provide objective, unbiased, reliable research regarding the health of those residing in the Coachella Valley. The data are collected via a confidential random digit dial telephone survey.