

OUR VOICE

The long journey toward health care improvements

The Coachella Valley is fortunate to have the Health Assessment Resource Center to measure the progress of our efforts to improve the fitness and health of our residents.

We're lucky to have the Clinton Health Matters Initiative, which has spawned the Coachella Valley Blueprint for Action, which set 45 wellness goals. The initiative also launched the Alliance for a Healthy Generation, setting new standards at all three valley school districts.

And the valley is enriched by the Desert Healthcare District, at least up to its eastern boundary of Cook Street in Palm Desert. With all that and so much more, we should be making progress.

However, a recent HARC report found that in a few areas residents within the district fared worse than their counterparts east of Cook Street. For instance:

» About 16 percent of district residents have been diagnosed with some form of cancer, compared to 12 percent of residents outside of the district.

» Heart disease affects 10 percent of district residents, but only about 5 percent outside of it.

» Childhood obesity affects 28 percent of children 2 to 17 within the district. Outside of the district, it affects 26 percent.

Other measures found the opposite trend. About 59 percent of district adults were overweight or obese, compared to 66 percent of other valley residents.

Michael Solomon, president of the Desert Healthcare District board, said that in most categories those within the district were doing a little better than those outside of it.

Dr. Glen Grayman, who is president of the HARC board and vice president of the district board, said the numbers indicate the message of "get active, get moving" isn't getting through. "They did neither," he said.

But it takes a long time to change behavior and to find tangible measures that reflect the change. It's possible that because east valley residents have less access to health care, fewer cases of cancer or heart disease are diagnosed. Roughly half of Coachella Valley residents went to the doctor in 2013, but non-district residents were more likely to go to a clinic or to health-care providers across the U.S.-Mexico border.

Kathy Greco, the district's CEO, pointed out that while diabetes rates have been predicted to



A health fair was held by the Borrego Community Health Foundation at the Desert Hot Springs Community Health and Wellness Center in Desert Hot Springs in October. OMAR ORNELAS/THE DESERT SUN

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increase, they have held steady, according to the HARC report.

"We put so much energy and resources on diabetes education," she said.

We'll count that as a success.

No matter the numbers, efforts to improve health and awareness must continue. We have excellent programs throughout the valley to make that happen.

The Desert Sun has long advocated expanding the health care district into the east valley, where needs are greater. Solomon said he has talked with east valley lawmakers about the possibility, but no legislation has been proposed. Formed in 1948, the district is supported by \$24 million in grants a year. It would take a public vote to expand the district.

However, Solomon said the Desert Healthcare Foundation is able to work with the east valley without the restrictions on the district itself. That's good.

Hopefully, the Affordable Care Act will increase the number of valley residents who have a primary care physician. And, hopefully, the efforts to train more doctors in the valley at Eisenhower Medical Center and through the UCR School of Medicine will provide physicians to fill the increased need.