

## Monday Newsmaker: Taking 'bold steps' to improve our health

Written by James Folmer The Desert Sun  
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Tricia Gehrlein is the regional director of the Clinton Health Matters Initiative, Coachella Valley.

Working in partnership with regional leaders, local health priorities were identified and the Coachella Valley Blueprint for Action was developed. She now works with the community to facilitate the implementation of the blueprint, identifying and leveraging resources to improve health outcomes and reduce disparities across the region.

Prior to her current position, Gehrlein was the manager of grants administration and program analysis at the Desert Healthcare District. As grants manager, she worked with more than 40 health and wellness service organizations serving all age groups, ethnicities and socio-economic status.

She was the key lead for the development and implementation of the Healthy Eating Active Living Network, addressing obesity rates within the Coachella Valley. She has worked closely with local community based organizations to improve their business model, delivery of service and to connect them with community resources for the benefit of their organization and clients.

(VIDEO: [Tricia Gehrlein talks about a series of meetings held this month to review the Coachella Valley Blueprint for Action](#) | MORE: [Read the Coachella Valley Blueprint for Action \[PDF\]](#))

**QUESTION:** When the Bob Hope Classic golf tournament became the Humana Challenge in 2012, it brought the Clinton Health Matters Conference to the Coachella Valley. From that the local Clinton Health Matters Initiative was born. Tells us about that evolution and how you became involved.

**ANSWER:** The Clinton Foundation is proud to be a part of the Humana Challenge and to host its annual Health Matters conference in the Coachella Valley. After the success of the first conference, the foundation decided that the epidemic of chronic disease and especially health disparities warranted greater attention and decided to launch a yearlong initiative to address these matters.

I became involved through my work at the Desert Healthcare District, working on behalf of the Desert Healthcare Foundation with Ginny Ehrlich, CEO of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, on a grant contract between the foundation and the alliance. Ehrlich just had been named the CEO of the new Clinton Health Matters Initiative. Once I learned of the work and the opportunity, I applied for the newly created position.

In December, community leaders gathered to create the Coachella Valley Blueprint for Action. Tell us about that process. Who was involved and what level of commitment have you seen?

More than 120 community leaders came together for a one-day session, developing out 44 bold actions to address health disparities and improve health outcomes in the Coachella Valley. We have experienced a high level of commitment from many community partners.

One example is the partnership Clinton Health Matters Initiative has with John Schwarzlose, CEO of the Betty Ford Center. Schwarzlose serves as an adviser to our national Prescription Drug Abuse Program, as well as committing on behalf of his organization to be the ongoing local leader in addressing the five bold steps in the "Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs" section of the blueprint.

The blueprint cites Health Assessment Resource Center data that say 16.4 percent of Coachella Valley children are overweight and 37 percent are obese. Most eat fast food at least once a week and about 17 percent don't have access to a healthy food outlet. How can those challenges be overcome?

As with all work of the blueprint, this challenge will be addressed by working with our community partners. Funded by the Desert Healthcare Foundation, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation is working within every school in all three valley school districts to help them accomplish health and wellness goals and reduce childhood obesity.

The Clinton Health Matters Initiative works closely with the alliance, and we assist each other in accomplishing the goals of both programs. The initiative also is working with community partners to identify ways of accomplishing the bold step that states “Enable retail access to healthier food options for all residents of the Coachella Valley within 5 miles of their homes.”

HARC also reports that 70 percent of valley residents don’t participate in daily physical activities. How can you get local residents moving?

There are five bold steps within the blueprint addressing physical activity. Among these are “Coachella Valley residents will have opportunities to be active for at least 60 minutes per day through their learning, working and neighborhood environments” and “Implement recreation infrastructure, including a trail system that allows all people of Coachella Valley to be active.”

Community partners have requested a review of each city’s general plan to identify where opportunities exist to create opportunities for recreation. Other ways to engage the community is to help our local partners raise awareness of the resources currently available and activities already under way.

How will you measure success?

Long-term success will be measured through the County Health Rankings ([countyhealthrankings.org](http://countyhealthrankings.org)). The measurements provided through the County Health Rankings were utilized to identify areas of disparity in the Coachella Valley. It was this information that was used in December to create the Coachella Valley Blueprint for Action.

Progress will be closely monitored throughout the next five years to determine the success of each individual bold step. Each six months, community partners will be asked to review progress, identify success or obstacles, and determine if a course correction is necessary. As the blueprint is a “living document,” programs to address the bold steps will continually be added, completed or modified as appropriate.

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