

Our Voice: Clinton summit a shot in the arm for valley

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(Photo: Crystal Chatham/The Desert Sun)

Former President Bill Clinton convened his Health Matters summit in the Coachella Valley this week, focusing on technology and creative partnerships to further efforts to make American communities healthier.

Clinton, who also presided as the celebrity face of the Humana Challenge golf tournament this past weekend, says the annual summit has spurred positive results in the areas of health care and wellness, but more work remains to be done.

The year-round initiative that Clinton's organization founded in 2013 to improve Coachella Valley health and wellness has spawned similar initiatives in Houston, Jacksonville, Florida, and Adams County, Mississippi. The foundation hopes these community laboratories spur ideas that will spread to other regions of the country.

Here in the valley we can use all the help we can get.

A study released in June by the Health Assessment Resource Center indicated residents living inside the Desert Healthcare District, which includes mostly west and central valley communities up to Cook Street in Palm Desert, aren't much healthier overall than their other valley peers. And despite programs aimed at boosting healthy eating and exercise, district residents actually scored worse when it came to rates of heart disease and childhood obesity.

Desert Healthcare District officials expressed surprise at the results of the study, which they requested, but expect their efforts to continue to pay off in terms of a healthier population in the long run.

Among the 45 goals in the Clinton Health Matters Initiative's Blueprint for Action drawn up at last year's summit was creation of a health care district for the eastern Coachella Valley.

The laudable mission of the Clinton summit already has seen progress, however.

CHMI regional director Tricia Gehrlein says there has been action on about 28 of the 2014 goals.

One of the highest profile is Get Tested Coachella Valley, a three-year campaign with more than 50 partners that aims to test every person in the Coachella Valley for HIV. Desert AIDS Project CEO David Brinkman told a CHMI panel this year that the effort is seeing great success.

"We can end the spread of HIV in 2015," he said.

Another example of community buy-in: Palm Springs Mayor Steve Pougnet says a new "Ready, Set, Swim" free program will teach 500 third-graders basic swimming, part of a Health Matters goal to get all valley residents to exercise 60 minutes each day.

Clinton's efforts have made the Coachella Valley ground zero when it comes to community health. CHMI's focus on creating partnerships among all sectors of society is proving effective in mobilizing a growing coalition focused on improving the lives of everyday citizens.

"I just want to encourage you because what we're seeing in these other communities we're working in is potentially their local version of what you're doing, but you're way ahead of them because we started here," Clinton told a crowd at the James O. Jessie Desert Highland Unity Center in North Palm Springs.

The annual CHMI summit gives the Coachella Valley a strong, valuable voice in setting the nation's health and wellness goals for everything from combatting childhood obesity to improving access to care.

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