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Our Voice: Bold steps to better health

Blueprint created by local stakeholders holds great promise

| *The Desert Sun Editorial Board*

As the Clinton Foundation's Health Matters Conference comes around this week, we celebrate the bold steps that have been established to improve the health of Coachella Valley residents.

The Blueprint for Action, created by 125 local stakeholders meeting throughout the year, established 45 steps. Each is accompanied by overall goals and "indicators of success" by 2018.

The bold steps include establishing a Substance Abuse Advisory Committee. Led by Albert Angelo, a California State University health educator based in Palm Desert, the committee held its inaugural meeting last month. It will collaborate with the Coachella Valley Association of Governments and community organizations including Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Shut Down Drunk Driving.

After the death at the hands of a suspected drunken driver of a 25-year-old Coachella woman in October — which led to the "Silent Stand" protest against driving under the influence last month — Coachella Mayor Eduardo Garcia persuaded CVAG to get involved. With all these forces coming together, The Desert Sun hopes they can reduce the carnage.

The overall goal is to reduce deaths and disease cause by substance abuse by half in five years.

\$24 a year goes a long way

Another bold step that would make a significant difference is the creation of an East Valley Health Care District. Since 1948, property owners in the west part of the valley have paid \$24 a year to support the Desert Healthcare District. It distributes about \$4 million annually. The boundary ends at Cook Street, although the health needs are greatest east of the thoroughfare.

The indicator of success says an east valley district will be established by 2018, which will require a public vote. The Desert Sun calls on Assemblymen Brian Nestande and V. Manuel Pérez and state Sen. Ben Hueso to make it happen. Rep. Raul Ruiz, who proposed this idea as part of the Coachella Valley Health Care initiative before he was elected to Congress, should add his clout.

The Desert Healthcare District is a huge asset in the west valley. As part of the Health Matters Initiative, its foundation pledged \$300,000 over three years to create the Coachella Valley Health Portal. It also committed \$100,000 for recreational programs and infrastructure, matched by \$100,000 in funding from Palm Springs Mayor Steve Pougnet's Healthy Planet, Healthy You race, which has been moved to the weekend before the Health Matters Conference.

Tougher challenges

Although The Desert Sun supports every one of them, some of the goals in the blueprint are more like giant leaps than bold steps, such as improving air quality. That's a big challenge. Most of our pollution comes from the Los Angeles basin as wind blows through the San Gorgonio Pass. And nothing is likely to stop sand blowing in the wind.

It also calls for an ecologically sound solution to address the public health threat of the Salton Sea. We

know how hard that will be.

The overall goal: “The Coachella Valley is the healthiest place in the nation.” Nobody can say they’re not aiming high.

Health Assessment Resource Center

Four years before the Clinton Foundation came to the desert, the assessment resource center was established. It is an invaluable tool to measure the effectiveness of awareness campaigns and other steps to improve our health.

Starting in 2007, HARC has conducted a comprehensive health survey every three years. Results of the third triennial survey will be released on Feb. 13. It may be premature to assess the success of Health Matters after only two years, but it could indicate trends.

Health Matters Conference

Celebrities won’t be as prevalent in the Humana Challenge golf tournament this week as they have been in the past. But the Clinton Foundation’s Health Matters Conference will bring many big names to our desert — Bill and Chelsea Clinton, Barbra Streisand, Deepak Chopra, the Rev. Rick Warren, Montel Williams, Kobe Bryant and more.

As exciting as it is to hear famous people discuss health and wellness, the more important work will be done after they leave. The Desert Sun applauds the initiative’s regional director, Tricia Gehrlein, for coordinating the stakeholders who have put together an action plan that holds great promise.
