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The Valley's Health: A Recently Released Report Shows Reason for Concern

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The Health Assessment Resource Center (HARC) is a community-based organization that works to assess the health needs of the Coachella Valley—and the organization recently released a report regarding the valley's health status and needs.

The findings, in many cases, were not pretty.

The Coachella Valley's nine cities and unincorporated areas are all represented through surveys done via random-digit dialing to residents in the valley. In 2013, the key finding for health-insurance coverage was that one-third of adults between 18 and 64 were without health insurance. However, the Affordable Care Act (aka ObamaCare) is now having a significant impact on access to insurance, so numbers will most likely improve in future surveys.

As far as major diseases go, high blood pressure/hypertension was the most prevalent in the Coachella Valley, at 37.8 percent (134,208 residents), followed by high cholesterol at 30.8 percent (108,183 residents).

Eileen Packer, the chief executive officer of HARC, said the valley's older population is, in part, to blame for the high blood pressure/hypertension and high-cholesterol numbers.

There were other unwelcome surprises in the data: Nationwide, 55.3 percent of Americans report consuming at least one alcoholic beverage per month. The Coachella Valley, however, has a rate of 65.4 percent. The statistics on binge-drinking were also alarming, with a nationwide average of 16.9 percent of people binge-drinking at least once per month—and the Coachella Valley at a whopping 30 percent

"We have people where we saw significant increases in binge-drinking," Packer said. "There's also a significant increase in alcohol consumption."

Another disease on the rise is cancer.

"When we looked at cancer in 2007, it was 9 percent," Packer said. "Now it's at 13 percent, which is significantly higher. I know worldwide, they are looking at cancer increasing."

HARC also monitors factors that are associated with health, such as the general demographics of the area, social characteristics and socioeconomic factors. Packer expressed concern about the number of children living in poverty.

<http://www.cvindependent.com/index.php/en-US/news/local-issues/item/1397-the-valley-s-health-a-recently-released-report-shows-reason-for-concern>

"We have more children living in poverty," Packer said. "... It went from 28 percent in 2007 to 48 percent in 2013."

Packer said she expects the results to be much different in the next report; the reports are done every three years. "Because of the Affordable Care Act, we'll be looking at the uninsured. ... It increased significantly from 2007 to 2013. In 2016, it'll be interesting with the Affordable Care Act and signing people up how dramatically that's going to change."

With all of the recent shootings in the news and the call for more mental-health services nationally, Packer said the Coachella Valley, along with the entire state of California, needs to improve when it comes to access to mental health care. In the Coachella Valley, 54.1 percent of adults 18 to 64 do not have mental-health coverage. There was also an increase in the percentage of adults who have a mental health concern—from 18.2 percent in 2010, to 25.3 percent in 2013.

"Having seen the changes in mental-health care over the years—and I think it went back to Ronald Reagan when he started the decrease in funding for mental-health services—the dollars allocated to it have dramatically decreased," Packer said. "We've had closures here in the valley for in-patient beds. We don't have the psychiatrists, so we definitely have needs here for mental-health-care carriers and practitioners."

As far as the health needs of the Coachella Valley as a whole are concerned, Packer pointed to the new medical school at the University of California, Riverside, as an encouraging sign.

"There are statistics quoted over and over again that we do not have enough family-practice physicians here in the Coachella Valley," Packer said. "We do have an effort under way to change that with the (new University of California, Riverside) School of Medicine ... and in 2015, they are going to have residents to provide community service. When the medical school was approved, it was approved to be a community-based medical school, and not one housed in a hospital. The residents will be out in the community providing services. The Eisenhower Medical Center has residents right now from USC, and the hope is that the residents will then stay here in the Coachella Valley."

For more information or to read the whole HARC Community Health Monitor 2013 Executive Report, visit www.harcddata.org.