

Prevention is key

Linda Shak, Oakland

(San Francisco Chronicle, July 30, 2009, page A-10)

Bravo to the California Public Employees Retirement System (CalPERS) for recognizing that prevention is key to preventing illness before it occurs and reducing health care costs ("Waistlines expand bottom line," Open Forum, July 20).

I hope that our national leaders take a cue from CalPERS and ensure that prevention remains a core component of health reform legislation.

Controller John Chiang and Dr. Harold Goldstein got it exactly right:

Ensuring that the places where people live, work, learn, and play support health keeps people healthy and reduces the burden on our health care system.

Original article

"Waistlines expanding our bottom line"

John Chiang and Harold Goldstein

(San Francisco Chronicle, July 20, 2009, page A-11)

We all know what a fast-food diet can do to our waistlines, but rarely do we look at what it does to California's bottom line. On the same day that The Chronicle published a story about Mayor Gavin Newsom's push for more community gardens, healthier vending machine options and greater access to affordable, nutritious foods, the California Center for Public Health Advocacy released a report that shows the impact bad nutrition has on the state's fiscal health.

In California, reported costs of rising obesity and physical inactivity rates have doubled to \$41 billion in just the last six years. To put that amount in perspective, \$41 billion is nearly what the state spends on health care (\$21 billion), social services (\$10 billion) and prisons (\$10.2 billion), combined. It is slightly more than the \$37 billion the state spends on K-12 education. Worse, the costs of obesity and physical inactivity are projected to rise to \$52.7 billion by 2011 - more than half of the state's current budget. In San Francisco alone, health conditions associated with obesity and physical inactivity cost nearly \$1.1 billion every year, with much of the burden paid by the private sector in the form of mounting health care costs and lost productivity.

Heart disease, cancer and diabetes resulting from obesity and physical inactivity - the major contributors to rising health costs - represent a preventable drain on California's troubled economy. The study shows that cutting obesity and physical inactivity by just 5 percent could save the state \$2.4 billion a year.

From the pocketbook perspective, doing nothing to curb rising obesity is more expensive than forging progressive policies that focus on prevention. That's one reason the California Public Employees Retirement System, the nation's largest public pension plan, has begun promoting prevention for its nearly 1.3 million members. CalPERS is working

with its health plan partners to emphasize prevention, exploring effective workplace wellness programs, working with UCSF on a pilot program for diabetes management, and eliminating co-pays for prevention-related care.

There is no denying that each of us should take personal responsibility for our food choices. But it is fiscally irresponsible to ignore the role our community has in supporting healthy options. Every successful public health movement - from sanitation to air pollution, from drunk driving to tobacco use -has shown that people can only be healthy if public policies are in place to support them in making healthy choices.

When grocery stores are replaced by fast-food outlets, the ability of families to make healthy choices becomes more difficult. When vending machines are stocked with sugar-packed snacks and beverages, we further that challenge. When parks and other open spaces are closed off or developed, we're less likely to be physically active.

Even in tough economic times, smart business people consider their return on investment. Developing walking paths to neighborhood grocery stores and playgrounds and opening city parks to farmers' markets and other community activities may cost more, but these healthy steps will benefit not only our physical health, but also our fiscal health.