

OUR VIEW

Health efforts run on citizen commitment

Add Steps to a Healthier Salinas to the programs addressing obesity and other health issues in this city. Given the scale of the Steps effort - \$8 million over five years - something good can't help but come from it.

But of all the money and resources, strategies and programs devoted to encouraging healthier habits locally, the most effective tool remains the least expensive one - the personal commitment and relationships that encourage healthy lifestyle changes. It sounds simple, but without that self-awareness, the health revolution fails. Anyone dieting can attest to this.

Looking for a sea change in the lives of Salinas residents - or any modern community, for that matter - is a mammoth undertaking. For the city's Latino population, it represents a cultural change as well.

Salinas is one city hurting health-wise:

- One in four adults is obese.
- Nearly one in three young people 12 to 18 are overweight.
- Nationally, deaths linked to poor diet and lack of exercise increased by 33 percent in the past decade.

But that's what is so promising about Steps. Through its partners and organizers at the Monterey County Health Department, Steps seeks to give Salinas residents the chance to make healthy choices - at work, at school and in their neighborhoods.

It remains an uphill battle to promote health over convenience. Programs like Steps amount to one calorie compared to the weight of billions of dollars in advertising spent by the food industries that pump commercials 24/7 into Salinas households.

Getting help from the private sector is one good strategy for sending the health message, too, such as at La Princesa markets. Checkout counter displays, a magnet for impulsive buyers, is being stocked with fresh fruits instead of candy bars. It's a radical change, even a risk for businesses, but worth a try and commendable.

No health program can succeed without individuals making a commitment to change. Programs present the facts and suggestions for change, but the residents have to act on them.

In the end, perhaps the greatest progress to be made in the Salinas health campaign - a personal investment - won't cost a penny, but will add up to some big dividends.

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