

Poor diet main reason impoverished in Greeley, Evans unhealthy

By Dan England

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From the center of The Pines, just a few yards from the playground that draws children like ants to a sugar cube, a dirt path leads to a barren field.

You could call the path a trail, since it looks as worn as some of the paths used by hikers up 14ers. But it fades as it cuts through the field, and by the time it approaches the busy street that divides the apartment complex from the Greeley Mall, it vanishes under your feet.

The walk to nowhere makes Rocio Miramontes sad. The North Colorado Health Alliance hired her as a part of its community care corps to help residents of those neighborhoods get healthy. It's her job to find resources the poorer residents could use.

There was a resource last year, one of the best out there. The residents created a community garden in the field. The garden was one of the few ways residents could get fruits and vegetables. But either the managers of The Pines, which is east of 23rd Avenue and south of 30th Street, didn't allow the residents to plant one, as Miramontes believes, or the interest wasn't there. It's hard to say because managers of The Pines didn't return calls from The Tribune seeking comment.

Access to fresh fruits and vegetables is just one of the many problems those with low incomes face in leading healthy lifestyles. The residents of The Pines are luckier than their neighbors or those who live farther northeast or southeast, as a Wal-Mart sits across the street. But that street is a doozy, 23rd Avenue, and is built for heavy traffic from cars, not feet.

Others who live in Miramontes' coverage area of U.S 34 to 37th Street and 23rd Avenue to U.S. 85 live in food deserts. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a food desert as an area with low income and low access to stores that sell fresh food. Many neighborhoods in northeast or southeast Greeley and Evans are food deserts because a high percentage of the residents live more than a mile away from a supermarket while earning less than 80 percent of what other Coloradans make in wages.

A healthy diet is important, perhaps more important than any other piece of living well, said officials from the Weld County Department of Public Health and Environment.

“It’s really hard to out-exercise an unhealthy diet,” said Andrew Glendenning, healthy Weld 2020 coordinator. Of course, access to food in general, let alone healthy food, is an issue for some.

“You aren’t worried about what your next meal is going to be,” said Kelly Campbell, an educator for the health department, “it’s being worried about your next meal, period.”

But for those who eat regularly but still find themselves with low incomes, and live in places where access to healthy food is a problem, and probably don’t own cars, it can be challenging.

The issues that affect income levels tend to affect a person’s health, said Eric Aakko, division director of health communication, education and planning for the health department. One of the biggest is education.

Many times, those without extensive educations, such as a college degree, think they are eating well or making the right choices for their children, health officials say, but are fooled by the products.

This is a problem for everyone, not just the poor, but the typically lower educations of those in poverty make it difficult for them to break through the wall of expensive and intense marketing wielded by the large food companies. Sweetened cereals, for example, can meet some requirements to earn a National Heart Association sticker, and yet the first ingredient is sugar, Campbell said. Companies call their products fruit snacks when they’re similar, too similar, to gummy bear candy. Drinks market themselves as wholesome because they have 10 percent fruit juice.

“We are pro personal responsibility, but it’s harder to be that way because we are lied to by products all the time,” Campbell said. “The food industry has completely distorted everything. People don’t even know what healthy food is any longer. You can’t compete with a billion-dollar ad budget.”

Education is important, Aakko said, because with all the talk about food deserts, putting a stocked grocery store in a poorer neighborhood is no guarantee that the residents will choose the healthy options.

“They pick the stuff they grew up with,” he said. “Yes, you would get some improvements, but you have to have some education and outreach to go along with that.”

You also have to teach them how to cook. Cooking is a lost art, Aakko said, and if residents learned how to prepare meals, using food from scratch, they would most likely be healthier and cheaper. A meal at McDonald’s is cheap and easy, but a meal of red beans and rice cooked at home is much cheaper and healthier, Aakko said.

“But you have to know how to cook beans and rice,” he said.

Getting poorer residents motivated to eat well, cook and exercise are hurdles health officials face with the middle class as well. The sad thing is most people don't become motivated to change their health until something about it breaks down, such as a heart attack, Campbell said.

But there is hope. The county gave out grants to start more than a dozen community gardens across Weld, and Greeley has many of them as well. Churches have also devoted plots of their land to gardens.

Family of Christ Presbyterian Church started its Ubuntu Community Gardens and Orchard to help others eat fresh, healthy food.

If it seems hopeless, well, health officials point to smoking. In the 1990s, the thought of a smoking ban in all restaurants and bars seemed like a pipe dream. But today, you won't go into an establishment full of smoke in most cities, including Greeley.

"It seemed like that would never happen, and it did," Aakko said. "That's why we think we can make a change."