

# **Tribune Opinion: We all must work to end health inequality**

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Among all the challenges that come with being poor, the one most of us probably think least about is among the most important — health.

When you don't have money, there are lots of things that make it difficult to lead a healthy lifestyle. Without a car and a nearby grocery store, it's tough to get the kind of fresh fruits and vegetables that form the staples of healthy diets. If English isn't your native language — or if you lack education — it's difficult to see through the billion-dollar marketing campaigns that cast sugary cereals as healthy breakfast food. Many neighborhoods in poor areas don't have sidewalks, so it's hard even to go for a run or take a walk. And if you're struggling to make ends meet, you're not going to buy a gym membership.

All of these roadblocks to living healthy, of course, come on top of the kinds of challenges each of us face all the time, such as finding the motivation to workout, or the will to skip that Big Mac.

“The thought is anyone can exercise if you just put your mind to it,” said Jessica Cooney, an English language acquisition teacher at Greeley West. “Well, not really.”

The numbers tell the story. In 2010, 38 percent of adults living in households where annual income was \$15,000 or less rated their own health as fair or poor; only 3 percent did so where household income was \$75,000 or more. Only 6.3 percent rated their health as fair or poor from those making \$50,000-\$74,999 a year, according to a survey by the Weld County Department of Public Health and Environment.

The correlation is clear. Wealthier people lead healthier lifestyles, and it has little to do with the desire of those in poverty to make healthy choices.

“They know they are supposed to eat healthy and be active,” said Dr. Mark Wallace, who runs the Northern Colorado Health Alliance, a public-private partnership designed to promote healthy lifestyles. “But they've got graver things on their plate.”

The problem affects children, too. Many don't have a safe place to play. For students who have an interest in sports, which would get them physically active and give them confidence, financial hurdles — such as participation fees — often mean they can't play. Even if the costs of participation aren't an issue — and there are many teachers and coaches in Greeley-Evans School District 6 who work to ensure that at least in some cases they're not — many students must work after-school jobs to help support their families. That means they can't make it to practice.

But there are things we can do to make a difference. Just as no single factor causes this problem, no one single action will solve it. There's a role for each of us to play. City and county governments must do more to ensure that infrastructure is in good repair and there are sidewalks, even in poor parts of town. The private sector must also help fund efforts to give poor people access to a healthy lifestyle. Businesses can work with schools to help pay the costs of athletic participation, for example.

Each of us, too, has something we can do to help. As with so many other problems associated with poverty, education is key. That means that even something as simple as supporting the Boys & Girls Clubs of Weld County will pay dividends.

We need to solve this problem not only because it's the right thing to do, but also because we'll feel it in our wallet if we don't. According to a report by the Harvard School of Public Health, researchers estimate that Americans spent \$190 billion a year on obesity-related medical costs in 2005. If current obesity trends continue unchecked, by the year 2030, those costs could increase by as much as \$66 billion a year in the United States.

We must change these trends now. The first step is to recognize the problem