

A Call to Action Against Junk Food

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When you journey to the safety net hospitals and clinics that serve some of the neediest Americans, you will invariably find yourself in the heart of the urban core.

Nearby you will see establishments such as liquor stores, convenience stores and fast food restaurants. But often you will not see grocery stores that offer healthy foods at affordable prices.

This is certainly the case at the urban core campus of Truman Medical Centers in Kansas City, where I am the president and CEO. Truman is one of the most crucial safety net hospitals in the Kansas City area, providing services to more than 56,000 medical home patients with chronic diseases like diabetes, congestive heart failure, hypertension and obesity every year.

Yet while my office is about a minute away from a purveyor of cheeseburgers and fries, it is quite a distance from the closest fresh produce case. In other words, a classic example of an urban core “food desert” that fosters obesity and chronic health conditions.

The lack of healthy grocery shopping alternatives in Kansas City’s urban core is illustrated by a Healthy Food Access Map published last June by the Mid-America Regional Council.

The preponderance of fast food in the urban core, along with the dearth of healthy, affordable food, is a major cause of obesity and chronic health conditions.

According to the Mid-America Coalition on Health Care, of which Truman is a member, approximately 9.1 percent of all health care costs in the United States are related to obesity and being overweight.

That is a mind-boggling percentage when you consider that U.S. health care costs reached \$2.5 trillion in 2009. Additional estimated costs of obesity include \$4.3 billion a year in worker absenteeism and lower productivity that amounts to \$506 per worker per year, the coalition report said.

In a 2011 report on obesity, the Kansas City Health Department stated that “the rise in obesity rates is a result in changes in the environment that have simultaneously lowered the cost of food production, lowered the time and monetary cost of food consumption and decreased the health consequences that result from obesity by bringing a host of new drugs and devices to the market to better manage the adverse effects that obesity promotes.”

Some may argue that junk food is the most affordable alternative for urban core residents, but that is not true. In a Sept. 24 article in the New York Times, food journalist Mark Bittman wrote that a typical order for a family of four at a McDonald’s near his writing desk runs about \$28.

By comparison, Bittman wrote, for \$14 you can serve a home-cooked meal of roast chicken that would feed four to six people. Or for only \$9 you can dish out a meal of rice and canned beans with bacon, green peppers and onions, Bittman added.

Each of us has a role to play in the battle for healthier food. Individuals, schools and employers must step up and do their part.

Hospitals must weigh in, with words and actions. At Truman, we are seeking to replace the fast food restaurant at our urban core campus with a vendor that will offer healthier food. I feel very strongly about this because I don't think our message about healthy eating will resonate unless we set a good example.

Truman also is working toward the establishment of a new grocery store near our campus that will provide our neighbors with healthy, affordable food — an oasis in our food desert.

Each one of us has a role to play, and each one of us must do his or her part in this fight. The health of our country depends on it.

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