Making progress: The battle against childhood obesity
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This is what people don’t understand: obesity is a symptom of poverty. It’s not a lifestyle choice where people are just eating and not exercising. It’s because kids are getting sugar, fat, empty calories – lots of calories – but no nutrition.

–Tom Colicchio

In November 2014, I composed an Anti-Poverty Soldier column that focused on the subject of childhood obesity. Among the items featured in this piece was a Community Action pilot program titled “Farm to Head Start,” which in part is designed to connect Head Start children and their families to fresh local produce while promoting proper nutrition in the home.

The column also cited a Minnesota Department of Health report that demonstrated Minnesota children between the ages of two and five were significantly more likely to be obese if they were enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC). Statistics such as this have long provided fuel to critics of programs like WIC and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) who suggest that government initiatives such as these foster unhealthy eating and contribute to America’s obesity epidemic, especially among children.

Others such as celebrity chef Tom Colicchio and author/food expert Michael Pollan contend that with or without such programs, access to a healthy, well-balanced diet with a sufficient supply of fresh fruits and vegetables is a considerable challenge for low-income families in America. They also note that while childhood obesity disproportionately affects those living in poverty, the lack of proper nutrition and adequate consumption of fresh produce is a threat to the health and wellness of all children regardless of socioeconomic status.

In spite of these challenges however, there is some good news in a November 2016 report by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), particularly as it relates to low-income children receiving WIC. The CDC study reveals that during the previous four years, the incidence of obesity in young children enrolled in WIC (between the ages of two and four) fell from nearly 16% to 14.5%.

Although this might not seem like a huge drop, the decrease is considered statistically significant. As one might expect, Minnesota already compares well to its counterparts boasting the seventh lowest rate of childhood obesity among each of the 50 states and Washington, D.C. And during the previous four years, Minnesota has seen its obesity rate among toddlers receiving WIC fall to 12.3%.
The drop, both nationally and statewide, has been attributed to the WIC program’s enhanced efforts to make healthy food more readily available and affordable to participants. Efforts have also included education initiatives around proper nutrition and appropriate linkages to healthcare providers. In its attempts to help reduce childhood obesity among low-income children even more, the CDC is further encouraged by new and innovative projects such as Let’s Move that promotes physical activity among youth as “an essential component of a healthy lifestyle.”

Notwithstanding the recent progress that has been made, the obesity rate among youth remains far too high. In fact, the rate among 10 to 17 year-olds continues to increase essentially having tripled since the 1980s. In Minnesota, the obesity rate among this age group has increased from 10% to 14% since 2004.

The significance of this health crisis cannot be overstated. Susan Perry, consumer health columnist for MinnPost writes kids that suffer from obesity “are at greater risk than their normal-weight peers of developing high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, asthma, joint problems, heartburn, and sleep apnea.” She adds that these children are disparately subject to an array of other social and emotional issues that are detrimental to their health.

Progress is being made. But there is so much more work to be done as it relates to education, outreach, and programs designed to ensure that our young people have access to the health and nutrition they deserve. As President John F. Kennedy once famously said, “Children are the world’s most valuable resources and its best hope for the future.”

Clarence Hightower is the Executive Director of Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties. Dr. Hightower holds a Ph.D. in urban higher education from Jackson State University. He welcomes reader responses to 450 Syndicate Street North, St. Paul, MN 55104