

How to Answer Hard Questions about Prevention in Health Reform

1. Why should we increase funding for prevention when the Congressional Budget Office says prevention doesn't save money?

Some prevention services save money, while others don't. Even so, many of the ones that don't save money are cost-effective and give you incredible value per health care dollar spent. Instead of writing off prevention services because not all of them save money, we should find ways to encourage use of the preventive services that help make our health care system more cost-efficient. Specifically, community has been shown to have a high return on investment (http://preventioninstitute.org/documents/PreventionforaHealthierAmerica_7_08_001.pdf).

In fact many of the recent criticism about prevention not being cost effective weren't about community prevention at all. Instead these studies looked at services for people who are already sick. These services are important also, but the studies citing a lack of cost effectiveness did not look at community prevention strategies.
2. Isn't prevention a matter of personal responsibility? Why should the government get involved?

We certainly agree that personal responsibility is important, but we need to meet people half way to help them make better choices. If there are no safe places to play or exercise in the community, that's a community responsibility. If there are no sidewalks in a community that would allow kids to walk to school, that requires a community solution. If there are fast food restaurants a block away in any direction, but you have to ride a bus for an hour to buy fresh produce, that's a problem the community can help solve. Evidence shows individual behaviors and subsequent health outcomes are shaped by that individual's environment.
3. Why do we need a "nanny state" forcing us to be healthy?

No one can or should "force" us to be healthy. However, government policies and programs can and should help create environments that support health. Government policies can also help increase health equity by prioritizing the most vulnerable and under-resourced communities. In so doing, community health programs help give everyone a better chance to have a healthy life.
4. Isn't it more important for us to provide proper care for people who are already sick than providing services to people who "might" get sick?

Of course, we must take care of people when they need medical care. But if we don't also focus more on community prevention and public health, we will not be successful in containing medical costs, and it will only get harder to provide medical care when people need it. Community prevention programs save money and needless human suffering.
5. Why are we even talking about including parks and jungle gyms in health reform?

Community prevention is about more than parks and jungle gyms. Even so, evidence shows that when a community has access to parks and open space, they are more likely to have higher levels of physical activity. Higher rates of physical activity lead to lower rates of chronic diseases such as diabetes and cardio vascular disease which ultimately lower unnecessary medical costs. Investing in efforts that improve community health has a high return on investment in the form of reduced medical expenditures associated with chronic diseases. Community prevention is integral to health reform efforts because it is about keeping people healthy in the first place.

6. Isn't community investment impractical in the sense that it is too hard to implement on a national level and difficult to evaluate?

No, there are numerous examples across the nation showing the benefits of community investment. We must bring these types of initiatives to scale to see the benefits on a national level. Provide evidence by describing examples of successful programs/initiatives from your community.