

## ***Are we Sweet Enough?***

Hi, Get Healthy Partners. At San Mateo County Health System, I work to improve access to affordable, healthy food, community capacity and healthy and inclusive urban planning to improve community conditions. For this month's perspective, I want to delve into the health effects of sodas and other sugary drinks.

The research is really clear, sugary drinks are not healthy and in fact, they are a key cause of the increased obesity and diabetes rates we've experienced here in San Mateo County and across the country over the last several decades. Did you know that sugary drinks are the number one source of added sugar in the American diet? Or, that liquid sugar is particularly dangerous because it's absorbed so quickly – in as little as 30 minutes – forcing the liver to convert it into liver fat that leads directly to diabetes? A little wonky, I know, but it's why sugary drinks are even more problematic than candy bars or sugary desserts.

We've had a 250% increase in the prevalence of diabetes in San Mateo County over the last ten years - a staggering increase for any disease. The health effects of sugary drinks are severe. They are also inequitable. Liquid sugar is a key driver of skyrocketing diabetes rates particularly in Black and Latino communities, driven in part by ad campaigns that specifically target these communities. There are lots of ways to help limit consumption of sugary drinks in targeted communities and across the county.

For this perspective, I'd like to share what some local experts are doing to change these conditions. I sat down with Anthony Heimuli from the Youth Leadership Institute (YLI). Anthony convenes a team of young people in South San Francisco and Daly City, *Youth Organizing San Mateo County YO! Mateo Are We Sweet Enough?* who has been driving the charge for healthy beverages in this county. As I write, this team is celebrating Monday night's success after working closely with the Daly City Council to make the City the first in San Mateo County to support SB 203, a state bill which would place health warning labels on sugary drinks. Unfortunately, yesterday SB 203 died because it was short just one vote to move it forward. But, there are lots of strategies to move this work forward as you'll see below.

Here's what Anthony had to say about the impacts of sugary beverages, and about what San Mateo County's youth of color are doing to reverse them:

*The negative impact of sugary beverages is a slow reality for young people, since they don't have the health problems yet. But they see the impacts in a large percentage of their family members who have diabetes and/or are obese. The relationship with sugar drinks is complicated, because a lot of these beverages are a part of different cultures and family activities in Daly City and South San Francisco. Many people are used to drinking sugar drinks, but are not aware of the health impacts down the road. Youth and their families need a cultural shift.*

*The youth of color we work with have firsthand experience with the cost of their families' medical bills, the difficulty balancing schoolwork and caring for sick family members – a perspective that is not often told. Most of our youth come from marginalized communities that are not generally represented in the decision making process. However, we know that youth are resources and change makers in their community and need space to amplify their voices. The way we do this is through youth-led action research and through youth-adult partnerships enabling youth to share their perspective and take action. The youth have been interviewing merchants and decision makers, collecting and analyzing data, and making informed recommendations to elected officials.*

*We worked with the Daly City Council in support for the [State warning label bill](#) (SB 203) on sugary drinks, which we see as one step towards changing social norms, and inspiring consumers who are currently purchasing unhealthy beverages to rethink their drink. We're building a unified front with local elected officials, community members and store merchants in support of this measure. So far, we've reached out to over 50 merchants, creating authentic relationships with them to ensure transparent collaborative efforts.*

*Our ultimate goal is to increase awareness and access for affordable, healthy food, so that low-income community members and families have the ability to reduce the negative health outcomes sugar sweetened beverages play by race, class, income, etc. in our community.*

To get involved in YLI's work, or to learn more about how you can take action for healthier drinks please [contact us](#).

Anthony and YLI youth leaders are doing inspirational work. And they aren't the only ones. Others in the county are taking on this issue with dedication. It will take a lot of us working together to reverse the diabetes trends in our county. We need to do as much as possible to help lower consumption of sugary drinks and increase access to healthy, affordable food, and clean water.

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*Staff Perspective: April 2015*

