

## OPINION

## Sobering News on Health Care Disparities

## Taking control of our health

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Most, if not all, African-Americans look at President Barack Obama as the ultimate symbol of the gains our people have made in the last several decades. Yes, there is still work to be done but we are, on the surface, doing better economically and financially than we were just a few generations ago.

Dig a little deeper, however, and you'll find that huge disparities still exist. Health and healthcare are two of the areas you'll find those glaring holes.

According to the Center for Disease Control, African-Americans are affected by and die from heart disease, diabetes, cancer, HIV and homicide at disproportionate rates.



Our infant death rate among is more than double that of whites. Heart disease death rates are 40 percent higher for African Americans than for whites and the death rate for all cancers is 30 percent higher for us than for whites. The death rate from HIV/AIDS for African Americans is more than seven times that for whites, while the rate of homicide is six times that for whites.

Sobering news, indeed.

Why are we affected at such

alarmingly high rates? There are many reasons and poverty is among them. Many African-Americans have no health insurance and a trip to doctor is an expense many can't afford. For those who do have insurance the co-pay for a doctor's visit is often too high.

Lack of access to healthcare is another reason. Health clinics in urban areas have been closing as local governments have struggled to balance their budgets. Without a doctor in their neighborhood, many don't have the resources to travel to seek care.

We can't let ourselves off the hook: as a people, we must take responsibility for the food we eat and the unhealthy lifestyles we live.

We must learn portion control,

monitor our intake of salt and limit fatty and fried foods, no matter how good they taste. We must also incorporate physical activity into our lives and practice safe sex. And we must teach our children to do the same.

To be fair, eating healthily is easier said than done, especially for those living in urban cities, surrounded by food desserts and few grocery stores that stock healthy, well-priced items.

The government is doing its part to help address these and other issues that lead to health disparities. The Department of Health and Human Services is providing \$100 million in community grants to promote healthier lifestyles and the CDC, with their, Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health,

is steering funds to local programs that target blacks and Latinos in an effort to close these gaps.

The healthcare law President Obama fought to pass includes provisions for programs that work in underserved communities to provide healthcare and screening; that law is one of the best tools we have at our disposal.

Our local legislators must work to ensure the funds provided are utilized in the best possible way, while we must work on a personal level to take control of our health. It's important that we stay healthy so that we may continue to achieve.

*Greg Mathis is a former Michigan District Court judge and current syndicated television show judge.*

## When Kids are on Path to Academic Success

## Cutting Head Start violates our values

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

The colors were brighter than any she had seen before. Shapes, letters, and lots and lots of colors adorned the walls. Around the room, children worked together building high rises with colored blocks and "reading" colorful picture books.

"I had never seen so much color," Angelica Salazar recalls of her first days as a Head Start preschooler in Duarte, Calif. She remembers her discovery of library books and spending hours curled up on the reading rug. Head Start provided her first formal English instruction. Her parents, who spoke mostly Spanish, enrolled her in the program knowing that their little girl would need to master English to succeed in school.

Salazar ultimately graduated from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. She's now a juvenile justice policy associate at the Children's Defense Fund where she helps us identify and change the policies that trap millions of our nation's children in a



pipeline to prison every year.

Before studying at Harvard, Salazar taught middle school English in an impoverished Los Angeles neighborhood as a

Teach for America corps member. She believes her early childhood experience in Head Start put her on the path to academic success and nourished her commitment to serving others.

In an interview for the National Head Start Association, her father relates in Spanish how he never had the opportunity to finish elementary school. Their family was poor, and he and his wife could not afford to pay for preschool. Head Start was a godsend for the entire family, helping Salazar's immigrant parents become more fully integrated into their community. It allowed her mother to work outside the home for the first time while her children received safe, high-quality care.

Salazar is one among over 20 million Americans for whom Head Start has given a positive start in life since 1964. Today, 15.5 million U.S. children live in poverty, and more than 20 percent of children under the age of 5 are poor, including more than 40 percent of black children and more than 33 percent of Latino

children. These are the kids Head Start is designed to serve.

More than 60 percent of students and 80 percent of minority students struggle to perform at grade level in fourth grade, eighth grade, and their senior year of high school. Readiness to begin kindergarten — especially for poor and minority children — is more critical than ever. But less than half of those children eligible for Head Start and fewer than 3 percent of those eligible for Early Head Start, a program for infants and toddlers, are enrolled.

Poor infants are already behind their higher-income peers in cognitive development at nine months old. The gap gets even wider for 2-year-olds. By kindergarten, poor children have to beat the odds to catch up — and as the testing shows, many never do. Quality, comprehensive child development programs are crucial for the physical, emotional, and educational health of all children — especially poor and at-risk children.

Early childhood programs significantly increase a child's chances of avoiding the prison pipeline that Angie now studies as a policy expert, and investments in quality early education can produce a rate of return to society significantly higher than returns on most stock market

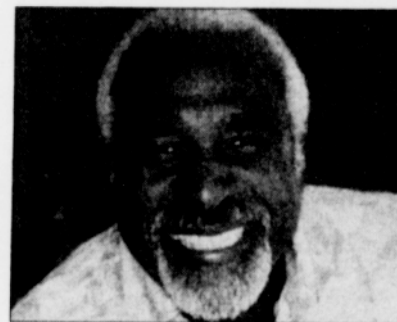
investments or traditional economic development projects.

Congress is debating whether to slash more than \$1 billion from Head Start and to cut several other essential programs for young children. But that's just the beginning. House Budget Chairman Paul Ryan's proposed budget would dismantle Medicaid and other lifelines for poor children. The Wisconsin Republican, meanwhile, is pushing for tril-

ions of dollars in new tax cuts that would benefit the richest Americans and corporations.

Where are our nation's values? We must stand up for programs that support the cradle-to-college pipeline. We simply can't afford to leave more poor babies, toddlers, and preschoolers behind.

*Marian Wright Edelman is the president of Children's Defense Fund.*



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