

State childhood obesity rates no cause for celebration

By MAREN STEWART | Posted: Sunday, December 4, 2011 12:00 am

Colorado may have the lowest adult obesity rate in the U.S., but its childhood obesity rate, 23rd in the nation, is no cause for celebration. In fact, Colorado's childhood obesity rate is rising at the second-fastest rate of increase in the country.

As president and CEO of LiveWell Colorado, a non-profit organization committed to preventing and reducing obesity in Colorado, I've come to understand a long-term solution not only requires personal behavior change but it also necessitates policy changes that result in environments conducive to healthy choices.

Place matters, and we need to ensure that the places we live, learn, work and play provide ample opportunity to eat healthy and be active.

A child's address can greatly impact the likelihood of him or her being obese. Some children live in one of Colorado's "food deserts," meaning access to fresh fruits and vegetables is limited, while fast food options abound.

Other children live in neighborhoods where it is either unsafe to walk or bike to school or there are no sidewalks or trails for them to use.

Where a child attends school can also impact his or her proclivity towards obesity. Changes in school policy, such as implementing scratch cooking in cafeterias and setting physical activity minimums can make it much easier to children to be healthy. For some children, school lunch is their most substantive meal of the day. As a result, this meal needs to be nutritious and tasty.

Opportunities for physical activity vary from school to school. To address this, LiveWell Colorado, in collaboration with other partners, this year helped pass HB1069, which requires Colorado public elementary schools to allow an average 30 minutes a day for physical activity.

The culture of a community is an important factor.

For example, some towns and cities have adopted zoning policies to allow for community gardens which encourage children to grow and then eat fresh fruits and vegetables; others have not.

Initiatives like farm-to-school programs that integrate fresh produce from local farms into public school kitchens is a great example of how municipal policy can support childhood obesity prevention efforts, as well as farmers, local businesses.

Lastly, families play an important role in setting a positive example and starting healthy habits at a young age.

Research shows that children who sit down to eat with their parents at least three times a week were 12 percent less likely to be overweight.

Parents who model healthy eating and active living are undeniably influential in helping children make healthy choices that will last a lifetime.

Only by addressing the issue of childhood obesity from all sides — motivating healthy choices and making those healthy choices readily available — will we truly be able to make a positive difference.