Health Disparities

Health disparities, also referred to as health inequities, are differences in the occurrence of disease or health conditions, health outcomes, risk factors, or access to health care based on demographic or socioeconomic characteristics of subgroups of a population. In order to interpret health disparities within a population, it is critical to understand root causes and contributing factors that influence health behaviors and health outcomes. These factors have been characterized as the ‘social determinants of health.’

The World Health Organization defines the social determinants of health as “the circumstances into which people are born, live, work, and age; and the systems put in place to deal with illness. These circumstances are in turn shaped by a wider set of forces: economics, social policies, and politics.”

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) created a health equity model that defines many social determinants of health and how they impact health behaviors across the life course (Figure 1). Life course spans from pregnancy through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The right side of the model represents the summary health outcome measures commonly used to describe population health (for example, death rates from cardiovascular disease, rates of obesity, or life expectancy). The remainder of the model depicts the various social, economic, and environmental factors impacting decisions people make about their health.
behaviors, which ultimately have an affect on better or worse health outcomes. The model also illustrates the complex role that health and mental health conditions and access to care have on health outcomes. In total, the model is intended to highlight the multiplicity of factors that have been shown to play a role in health at both the population and individual level.

Health disparities are rooted in differences based on social determinants of health, which help explain why certain populations have a disproportionate share of disease burden. Identifying health disparities defines those people in a population that are at higher risk for worse health outcomes. For example, circumstances in early life can have a profound effect on health at all ages. Inadequate education can limit employment options during early adulthood, which could lead to substantially lower family income, causing a family to live in a poorer neighborhood that does not have easy access to healthy food outlets, which in turn impacts eating behaviors that result in higher obesity rates among people with lower educational attainment. Additionally, these socioeconomic conditions may contribute to having poor access to care or undertaking other high risk health behaviors, such as cigarette smoking.

Why Health Disparity Matters
Achieving good health in a community is dependent upon identifying which people are affected by health disparities and engage in high risk behaviors. Understanding what has an effect on unhealthy behavior is instrumental to designing and implementing successful programs to improve health outcomes. Positive change may require intervention directed not only at certain people within a population, but at policies that support change in social, economic, or environmental circumstances within a community.

Health disparities or inequities are present in El Paso County. In this report, differences in health behaviors, outcomes, or risk are presented by age, sex, race/ethnicity, income status, and/or educational attainment in order to highlight where disparities exist. In the section containing socioeconomic data for El Paso County, maps are included to illustrate where people who may have health disparities live in the county. Presenting data in this manner is intended to help identify where and with whom focused efforts are needed to have significant and sustained progress in improving health.

1 National Cancer Institute [Internet]. Available from: http://crchd.cancer.gov/disparities/defined.html.