

INDIANAPOLIS BUSINESS JOURNAL

CENTRAL INDIANA'S BUSINESS AUTHORITY

VOL. 29 NO. 14 • JUNE 9-15, 2008

Smart policies can lengthen lives

Over the last 20 years, life expectancy for residents of the United States as a whole has increased steadily. However, recent studies by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have shown that not all Americans are enjoying longer, healthier lives. The implications of these studies are particularly ominous for Hoosiers.



**BRIAN
WILLIAMS**

Commentary

The disparities in life expectancy are most pronounced between richer and poorer Americans, reflecting the pronounced growth of income inequality the last two decades. In 1980, the most affluent and well-educated group of Americans could expect to live 2.8 years longer than people in the most deprived and least-educated group of Americans. By 2000, the difference had increased to 4.5 years.

Multiple studies have recently noted the poor state of the physical and environmental health of Indiana. The American Fitness Index developed by the American College of Sports Medicine in partnership with the WellPoint Foundation ranked Indianapolis 12th out of 16 metropolitan areas studied for community well-being.

Other studies have noted that Indiana ranks near the top in the nation in adult obesity and has the 15th-highest level of obesity among high school students. A recent Ball State University study noted that Hoosiers who smoke cost the state \$3.5 billion annually in lost economic

productivity. Indiana trails only Kentucky in the percentage of the population who smoke.

While many of the wellness studies recommend increased outdoor physical activity, the region's air quality regularly fails to meet EPA quality standards, and the Brookings Institute noted that the Indianapolis metro area has the second worst per capita carbon emissions level in the country.

Indiana has a high percentage of residents with high school degrees, but still ranks near the bottom in the percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree or more.

Low educational attainment, poor health and substandard environmental quality in Indiana all contribute to Hoosiers' having a life expectancy of about 76 compared with the national average of nearly 78.

An investment in primary and secondary education is a good way to start reversing these trends. Recess and physical education should remain part of the curricula, and the time dedicated to physical activity should not be consumed by marginally beneficial federal education mandates such as No Child Left Behind. The subsidized vending machines of the candy bar, soda pop and potato chip companies should be eliminated and replaced with fruits and vegetables supplied by local and regional growers. Few kids will eat them initially, but when they are the only choice, perhaps fruits and vegetables will gain a stronger following.

Kids should be encouraged to walk or ride their bikes to school. Sidewalks should be installed and maintained to

provide safe travel. More painted cross walks with signals are needed, as well as helpful crossing guards. Bike racks and scooter and skateboard stands are necessary.

The Cultural Trail should be fully funded and linked to a functioning environmentally sustainable mass transit system. The Metropolitan Development Commission should encourage residential and commercial redevelopment and construction that mitigates long-term environmental impacts and ensures the population densities necessary to support mass transit.

The city of Indianapolis should encourage and support the opening of farmer's markets in all neighborhoods, bringing more fresh fruits and vegetables to the city.

Entrepreneurs are already identifying ways to bring the fruits of the field to city tables. The founders of Farm Fresh—a startup that provides scheduled delivery of fruits, vegetables, dairy products and meat—is one recent example of how risk-taking entrepreneurs can benefit the community. Hoosiers might not appreciate fat middles, but they like a big bottom line.

Indianapolis has an abundance of natural resources and civic-minded entrepreneurs and corporations. By working in concert and with deliberate speed, perhaps in a few years when the next assessments are completed for wellness, obesity and environmental quality, Indiana will demonstrate gains that make a difference for all Hoosiers. •

Williams is regional venture partner of Hopewell Ventures, a Midwest-focused private-equity firm. His column appears monthly. He can be reached at bwilliams@bj.com.