



FROM *the* Director

Millions of Americans enjoy a standard of living that previous generations and people living in other parts of the world only dream of. To a large extent, hunger in America has been eliminated. Americans are spending smaller proportions of their income on food than at any time in the past and less than any other nation in the world. Advances in health care are astonishing. Yet, health and wellness are becoming issues of growing concern. Unfortunately, it seems that many Americans are translating high incomes and material comforts into sedentary lifestyles and food consumption patterns that are resulting in steadily growing rates of both physical and mental health problems. As a consequence, as noted by Linda Kruger, our guest editor for this volume, 17.3 percent of the total economic output in the United States went for health care in 2009 and this proportion has been steadily growing. In fact, it seems that for the first time in U.S. history, the average life expectancy for the average American is likely to decrease. In particular, skyrocketing rates of obesity among both adults and children are having

significant implications that include much higher rates of diabetes and other chronic illnesses, reduced worker productivity, more absences from work and school, more pain and suffering for individuals and families, and a reduced quality of life. Linda Kruger and the other contributors to this issue argue convincingly that increased levels of physical activity and more contact with nature could be a solution to many of these problems.

The mission of the Western Rural Development Center is to improve the quality of life for the residents of the rural West. At the center, we spend a great deal of time seeking to improve economic and employment opportunities in rural communities. However, improved health and wellness are a critical aspect of rural development. As such, we encourage federal, state and local governments, and the private sector to provide opportunities and develop programs that encourage individuals and families to make physical activity and contact with nature a regular part of their lives. It is vital that parks remain open and programs

retain their funding even during economic downturns when budgets become tight.

One of the great advantages of living in the West in general and the rural West in particular is the fabulous natural environment. Individuals and families will benefit extensively by spending more time with nature and less time with TV and video games. Additionally, when visiting nature, it is important to follow the advice of Edward Abbey and get out of the car and really discover the natural world. The articles in this issue do an excellent job of describing why this is important and how to do it.■

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