



**Teen Citizen Solutions
Discussion Summaries
July 23, 2012**



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Process and Participation Overview:

Teen Citizen Solutions is supported by the Bush Foundation with InCommons, in partnership with the Citizens League and a broad and growing coalition that understand the need for a new, citizen-led perspective to inform the state's future health policy. Teen Citizen Solutions hosted six weeks of dialogue between teens and adults to learn their insights and experiences and use them to inform the Minnesota Health Care Reform Task Force. Dialogues took place between May and July 2012.

The specific charge of Teen Citizen Solutions was to learn from teenaged citizens. Teens are consumers of health care in Minnesota. They are already developing lifestyle choices and habits that could affect their health and how United States health care works (including its cost) for generations to come. Teens also stand to inherit the long-term impacts of any decisions made about health care today. Therefore, teens' insights and experiences are important for members of the Minnesota Health Care Reform Task Force to consider as they carry out their charge to review the state's health care system as a whole and tackle issues such as how to hold down costs and deliver quality care.

Citizens League's Students Speak Out team posted, publicized and facilitated nine total discussions at www.studentsspeakout.org (hosted on the CitiZing civic engagement platform). During six scheduled weekly dialogues, teens responded to "question-askers" from the Minnesota community who are working to improve health and health care. Teens also participated in three "open discussions" on topics related to their own areas of interest. Questions and responses are summarized throughout this document. We invite you to visit the project Web site if you would like to read the full questions and responses.

The Students Speak Out and Citizen Solutions teams spread the word about the effort using Citizens League networks (Facebook, Twitter, broadcast email) and Students Speak Out networks (Facebook, Twitter, various contacts). We further contacted a number of schools and youth organizations, including some with a health focus, to encourage participation during a short project span. See the final page of this appendix for a list of school and youth organization contacts.

Participation:

There were 67 online project members of Teen Citizen Solutions. Over the six weeks of dialogue we hosted 668 unique visitors with 9,006 page views (not all visitors are members, but teens tell us that "visiting" ought to be recognized as learning and participating). Participants posted a total of 459 comments over the six weeks. Participants were from many areas of Minnesota, with a high concentration of them being from the Twin Cities.

Summaries of Six Weekly Discussions

Weekly Discussion #1: Lauren Gilchrist, Special Advisor to Governor Dayton at the Minnesota Department of Human Services asked teens

How do YOU define "health?" What does it mean to be healthy? Are Minnesota teens healthy, by your definition?

- Teens defined health as a balance between body, mind, and spirit. They stressed that you are only truly healthy if you are physically, mentally and spiritually healthy. (90%)
 1. Mental and spiritual health are just as important as physical health, but are underacknowledged in discussions about health. (You can't have one without the others.)
 2. In order to be healthy, it is important to know yourself and feel comfortable with yourself.

"I define health as the overall well-being of a person; this means their overall health physically, mentally, and emotionally." – Kathy

"I define health as being not only healthy in your body but also your mind as well. When you treat your body well by eating healthy food and getting good exercise then you are in fact healthy. On the other hand if all you are focused on is your body and not your mind you are actually hurting yourself more in my opinion." – Camille

"We (teens) define health broadly as a balance between physical, mental and social well-being. We also describe being healthy as a decision you make rather than something uncontrollable. It is our responsibility to practice healthy behaviors." – Louise (summarizing teens' comments in the final week)

- Seven out of thirty-one of teens said that Minnesota teens are healthy.
 1. Majority attributed unhealthiness of teens to the fact that teens are "too busy" to incorporate healthy eating and regular exercise into their routines.

2. They reported that often due to stress or anxiety and/or learned habits about what's a priority, they feel the need to meet school and work requirements before thinking about their health.
- Examples: Eating fast food instead of making something healthy at home and skipping the gym to work on a school paper.

“I definitely do think it's a decision between being healthy or doing well in my classes/getting assignments done. More often than not that decision comes into play with what I'm eating, because it's a lot quicker to grab a slice of pizza or some chicken strips from the food court than to sit down in the dining center and choose a healthier food option.” – Hannah
 - Depression was an issue of concern to teens when they discussed the mental health of themselves and their peers. Nine out of thirty-one teens brought up depression in their online dialogue about the definition of health.
 - Teens said that the media has a lot of influence over how people see themselves and others, contributing to distorted ideas of what it means to be “healthy.”
 1. Teens reported that the media promotes unrealistic visual definitions of health (or, what being “healthy” should look like), for both men and women.

“Teens are saying they are unhealthy because nowadays skinny supermodels are monopolizing social media... I feel that this generation is becoming more enticed by what they see on TV or computer than realizing what's best for themselves.” – Liz

“[Due to] all the pressure from the media to tan and dye your hair, healthcare is the least of concerns for a teen. Girls are pressured into eating disorders and boys are pressured into working out and getting buff. This also leads to depression, anxiety, and even teen suicide.” – Alyssa
 2. A few teens brought up bullying in relationship to health and the media. If you do not look a certain way, you are put in a position to be scrutinized.
 - Examples: Teens criticize one another for being overweight or weighing more than average (sometimes due to muscle mass) when, in fact, the person being criticized is actually a very healthy individual. Also, teens criticize one another for being underweight or smaller in size. Some are labeled as having an eating disorder when they do not.

Weekly Discussion #2: Stacy Becker, Facilitator of the General Citizen Solutions Project, asked teens to complete an activity that had been done with adults during in-person Community Conversations. After completing the activity, and over a week-long discussion, teens responded with the following:

**What expectations and responsibilities are most important to creating health and well-being for all Minnesotans?
Teens' top 3 expectations of the health care system and policymakers as we reform health care:**

- The care I need is affordable to me. (100%)
 1. Teens shared stories of friends and family members who are going without insurance and/or medical care due to cost.
 2. Teens said if healthcare is not affordable, people cannot get the help they need. This was not acceptable to teens.
 3. Three teens said that due to the nation's current economic situation, healthcare costs are one of the first things families are cutting back on.

“[Affordability] is clearly one of the most prominent problems our nation has. If people can not pay for treatment, there is no way they will get better. There are also those who get seriously hurt without health insurance and end up paying out of their noses for medical fees, hurling them into debt.” – Taylor

“Affordability is key in health care. I think that due to the high cost of health care, some people will put there health on the line simply because of the cost. In addition to that, wouldn't it be hard to heal when you're stressing so much about how your going to pay your bill off? Although stress is not always negative, continuous stress can lead to distress of your body, mind and emotions and a person who is already ill does not need this extra problem.” – Fatuma

“Affordability is clearly an important factor for most, if not all, of the panelists. From personal experience, the financial aspect has been important because it was a barrier at times to get medical attention to my soccer injuries in my legs. ...The bill was unpleasant to my parents. My family resorts to a huesero or a sobador (I don't know the direct English translation, but I found 'bone setter' on the internet) before going to the hospital or after

going and not receiving the proper medical attention or treatment for bone injuries, aching, etc. Going to the huesero or sobador is by all means cheaper than going to the doctor. ...I have found [financial concerns to be] less of an issue at times because I have gone to these hueseros or sobadores, saved more money, and have gotten better not only from leg injuries, but also from chest pains and sicknesses.” – Oscar

- I have the information I need to make good treatment choices. (50%)
 1. These teens stated that being educated on treatment choices is important to one’s overall health.
 2. Some teens suggested that being educated could help you weigh the pros and cons of treatment vs. cost.
 3. One teen said that he strongly felt that being educated could potentially help you to, not only make well-informed decisions for yourself, but also for friends and family.

“[Information about cost is important] because sometimes it is more painstaking for a person to pay for the care received than it is to suffer from an injury or disease. My uncle once told me that if he knew that his knee surgery was going to cost so much, then he would have never gone through with the surgery.” – Oscar

- I have access to healthy foods and a safe and healthy environment. (50%)
 1. These teens stated that this access will help sustain individual health.
 2. One teen suggested that if we could guarantee this access, it would save the nation money on healthcare because people would be healthier.

“People may have unequal access to [a healthy lifestyle and a healthy environment] due to many factors, such as: living in urban areas, being impoverished, or having a low income. Such long-term effects of living in an unhealthy environment could amount to such catastrophic illnesses as cancer, nutrition deficiency, prolonged durations of fatigue, etc., meaning more will be spent on health overall than if given opportunities to rectify and begin a healthy start (eating healthy, clean environment, eating well and enough).” – Liz

Other expectations that teens collectively labeled as priorities are:

- My care providers are focused on my overall well-being, not only medical treatment. (38%)
- The rules of my health care coverage are clear. (25%)
- I am allowed whatever care I decide I need. (25%)

Teens’ top 3 responsibilities of themselves/all citizens as we reform health care:

- I practice healthy behaviors. (88%)
 1. Teens stated that health begins with personal choices, first and foremost.
 2. Teens said that healthy behaviors are crucial to sustaining individual health.
- I help pay for care for those who cannot afford it through taxes and other ways. (63%)
 1. These teens stressed the importance of helping others who cannot afford to help themselves.
 2. One teen said that she and her family struggled with healthcare costs and “greatly appreciate” the help they received.

“As much as some people argue against having to pay for the care of those who can’t provide for themselves, as humans I feel we owe it to each other to help one another. What would you think if it were you in that position? As long as a person really needs medical care, I don’t think we should deny them of it and if that means taxing ourselves a certain amount for a greater good then I support and stand for it.” – Firi

- I follow the doctor’s orders. (38%)
 1. These teens tied following orders into the importance of taking responsibility for your own health.

“I really like the idea of a partnership between doctors and patients. This power relationship is vital basis for open communication. In this case, both doctor and patient have knowledge—one as an expert, and the other as an inquirer. Patients learn to trust, communicate, and respect doctors.” – Liz

Other responsibilities that teens labeled as priorities are:

- I seek preventative care and manage chronic conditions. (25%)
- I plan ahead for my health care needs when I am elderly. (25%)

Weekly Discussion #3: Dr. Douglas Wood, a medical doctor for cardiovascular diseases at Mayo Clinic asked teens

How do you learn about health? Are these means effective? How can we do better?

- Most teens stated that they learn about health through health classes at school. (73%) Some teens said that they learn about health from their parents and other family members. (27%)

1. Teens stated that their health classes were/are effective and are therefore an essential part of their education. (84%) However, teens also shared ways that health classes could be improved. (100%)

“I am really disgusted and disappointed that [some school boards around the nation are discussing making] health class optional. What part do they not understand? Do they not see the rising problems in teens like drug use, alcohol, bullying, mental health, physical health, teen pregnancy, weight issues, physical abuse in family and friends, peer pressure and sexually transmitted diseases? All these topics are covered in any general health class and maybe even more. Does the board not care about health of teens? For me health class was crucial to me because it made me aware of certain things like drugs and alcohol. I knew more about my health [after] I took health class.” – Tanzim

2. Some teens said that from health classes, parents, and sometimes through outside-of-school activities they have learned healthy coping strategies for dealing with anxiety and depression so they don’t turn to unhealthy coping strategies that put them in the hospital or lead to their deaths. Strategies include talking through feelings, listening to music, boxing, cooking, and dancing.

- Teens suggested a number of ways to improve how teens learn about health:

1. Instead of a list of “don’ts,” help teens understand the real, long-term consequences of unhealthy choices. One teen gave the example of understanding the effects that toxic chemicals have on cells “rather than broadly saying, ‘Smoking will lead to cancer’ or, ‘Don’t smoke!’”
2. Create a safe, positive, and respectful learning environment that focuses on positive reinforcement.

- Ensure that students are respectful of their peers as well as the issue(s) at hand.

“...All during the [Princess Diana video discussing self-inflicted injury and ‘cutting,’ specifically,] I heard people calling her ‘Emo,’ and laughing and texting. At one point I actually left the class and shed tears. Not only because of the ‘Emo’ comment but also the lack of respect for a very real issue.” – Leslie

- Focus on positive reinforcement for healthy, positive choices, rather than emphasizing consequences for unhealthy, negative choices. Examine contradictions in home and schooling environments, for example. Teaching about healthy diet and then offering unhealthy foods and failing to encourage physical activity is contradictory.

“It is easy for [teachers] to say smoking is bad and punish someone for smoking, but if [school leaders] don’t hand them an apple at lunch and encourage that good behavior as well, we are only fighting half the battle.” – Brett

1. In health classes, expose students to motivational speakers and other “live experiences” in addition to traditional information and videos. Videos work to educate but they are not nearly as effective as a “live experience.”

- Teens reported that such experiences might include hearing from people who have physical and mental health issues themselves, seeing a lung that has been damaged from smoking, informing teens about summer health camps, taking part in artistic performances, and visiting museums, hospitals, and clinics.

1. Offer health classes earlier. Teens shared that it would be beneficial to start health education classes in middle school or in the freshman year of high school (as opposed to the sophomore or junior year) in order to educate teens before they are exposed to and begin participating in unhealthy behaviors.
2. Cover a broad spectrum of topics. There was discussion about whether there is too much focus on STDs and AIDS prevention, compared to other aspects of health education. In general teens thought more attention ought to be paid to mental and emotional health as well as how to make choices now to prevent heart disease, cancer, and chronic lower respiratory disease.

“Schools should have health classes that are not necessarily centered around sex education but on a broader spectrum. [In my health class we] learned nutritional health, physical fitness, CPR and the Heimlich, mental illnesses, relationship safety and posture and eye conditions, to name a few.” – Emily

1. Incorporate more coping/stress management strategies, such as yoga, into teen health education.
2. Help teens understand the difference between processed foods and natural foods, and the impact of high-levels of sugar, salt, and sodium on the human body.

Weekly Discussion #4: Sanne Mangan, a medical doctor and President and CEO of the Institute for Clinical Systems Improvement asked teens

What would you change in the environment around you for health?

- Teens emphasized first that despite the environment, they are responsible for their own choices. While they were adamant that the environment is not to blame for their choices, there are factors that influence their choices. The factors they mentioned most frequently are in the following bullets.

“Personally I am the biggest contributor to my healthy/unhealthy choices. I decide what goes in my body whether it be healthy or not. I choose to see the salad and go for the cheese curds. Just like I walk away when I see my friends smoking.” – Leslie

- Some would change in-school health education to be more comprehensive and less preachy than it currently is (see the Week 3 summary, above). The information should be presented so teens understand the personal incentives for making healthy choices. If information is delivered in a way that ignores the reality that teens make decisions for themselves (and that adults can’t make them), they will rebel for rebelling’s sake.

“I do think that giving teens more of a voice would help the situation. A lot of the resentment for adults that often leads to poor decision making comes from adults thinking that they can make all the decisions for teens. Then, when the adult isn’t around and the teen faces a decision, they’re more likely to make the unhealthy choice because they think it’s punishing the adults when, in actuality, they’re just punishing themselves.” – Kevin

- Some would offer healthier options for school lunches and in school vending machines. Teens liked the idea of examining employer and college’s move toward labeling food (green for “go,” red for “think twice”) to show what’s healthy and what’s not. One teen described how her school placed a poster about healthy portion sizes visible to the teens standing in line to purchase lunch. Simple means of conveying information helps them make healthier choices.
- Some teens said they would change the home environment created by the habits and choices of family members and friends, although others said their parents already do a good job of keeping unhealthy options out of the house.
 1. Examples: Availability of “junk food;” second-hand smoke; choices of family members and friends to eat at unhealthy places (“group think” is that unhealthy is quicker and costs less even though that is not necessarily true); adults modeling unhealthy eating, smoking, and drinking habits.

“The most important thing that influences my decisions are the people I look up to in my life. For example my family doesn’t smoke, drink alcohol, or use any kind of substance that’s bad for you and being around them so much has really made me not want to even try those things because if they can live without it than so can I.” – Firi

- Some would change the negative influence media and marketing has on their environment. Male and female teens discussed feeling pressure to look a certain way based on what they see around them from “skinny” actors on movie posters to G.I. Joe action figures. Teens also said that the way foods are displayed in stores attracts their attention toward unhealthy foods they otherwise would not choose. Some indicated, however, that the media and marketing promoting healthy behaviors has a positive influence.
- Some would encourage more community/school physical activities. Teens suggested promoting exercises that can be done in the classroom (such as sitting on yoga balls instead of chairs), throwing ice skating socials instead of ice cream socials, and offering community marathons.

Weekly Discussion #5: Ellen Benavides, Assistant Commissioner at the Minnesota Department of Health, asked teens

How do you make the connection between your choices, lifestyle and habits, and the cost of health care? What are your ideas about ways to help keep you and your community healthier so that we spend less on health care/insurance?

- Some teens theorized that they and their peers do not understand the link between their choices and the personal and societal cost of health care because they are not the ones directly paying for their health care. Specifically, teen athletes make risky decisions thinking about their personal and team success but do not weigh the potential cost of their decisions.

But uninsured and less healthy teens, or teens from families with unhealthy medical histories, felt they were more aware of costs compared to their peers because their families must bear the brunt of the costs themselves.

1. A few teens mentioned that their families watch her health care costs closely because only a few or no members of the family are insured.
2. Three teens shared that they have hereditary health issues in their families that influence the way they monitor and take personal responsibility for their own health. They discussed the idea that monitoring their health now will benefit them later. Not only do they expect to be in better health as adults, but they also expect to minimize personal health care costs later in their lives.

“Its kind of interesting when you have a family full of health issues- mental, physical, emotional... all of that jazz, because you get really in-tune to the real cost of health care. Insurance doesn’t always cover what you need it to. The realization of how much health care really costs definitely stops me from doing certain things. I’m more responsible for myself because I’m afraid of the bills that come with getting hurt.” – Hannah

I think we learn really fast when we HAVE to what the system actually can do for us, and where exactly there are holes and tremendous costs.

- Other teens stated that some teens do not consider the long-term effects of their habits and choices due to an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ mindset.
- Four teen athletes said that many teens feel loyalty to a sport/team/coach that takes precedence over personal health and/or potential health care costs.
- Two teens discussed becoming injured while playing sports but “playing through the pain” in order to prevent being pulled from their prospective sports. They both stated that they did not consider the potential consequences of future medical costs and how those costs affect others. Teens wondered how much money could be saved on things like health care and physical therapy, if teens felt like health was priority over sports.

“My parents and others tried to keep me away from playing soccer [after my injury], but... I did not stop because the consequences they mentioned did not sound too serious.”
– Oscar

“I go to a high school that’s very big on sports and I see a lot of my friends disregard their health in order to get more playing time. On the field a lot of athletes will, if they get injured, say whatever they have to, to get back on the field. Concussions are one of the biggest of these problems. Often times an athlete will tell their coach that they feel fine so they don’t get pulled out of the game when, if left untreated, concussions can cause serious brain damage. Even responsible people off the field can make these poor decisions when they’re playing sports.” – Kevin

- Teens suggested that both teens and adults need to be educated on the economics of health care.

“I think we always have the expectation that no matter what happens the system will help us get back on our feet. I don’t think it’s just teens. I’ve seen adults do it too. We figure the system will have our back in some way or another... I think we learn really fast when we HAVE to what the system actually can do for us, and where exactly there are holes and tremendous costs.” – Hannah

“In terms of adult vs. teenager on consciousness of cost of healthcare, I don’t think that one is necessarily more conscious about cost than the other. I do think that they think about cost in different ways though. For instance, I would have never...known [before talking with my mom] that insurance plans can dictate what doctors you can choose to go to because I’ve never had to choose my own health insurance plan... [Also,] I think both coaches and student athletes could use education on the topic of health. Students have trouble seeing the long-term benefits of staying healthy because it is not always reinforced by coaches/adults... [Through] education and more trusting relationships between coaches and athletes I think at least some injuries (and cost) could be prevented.” – Louise

1. Teens reported the assumption that many adults they know, in and out of school, fail to educate them on the economics of healthcare because they, themselves, feel uneducated or not “qualified.”

- Teens said that the economics of health care is complicated and difficult for teens to understand without proper education. Over the course of the discussion teens were given articles explaining the health care costs as well as what factors contribute to cost. One teen who read them, who is a high achieving student, said she had no idea about any of it.
- Teens said that because they are not taught about the costs, it is easy “brush off” cost as something that doesn’t affect them or as a problem that will eventually solve itself.
 1. The large majority of teens reported that they liked the idea of adding health care cost education, from both a personal and societal perspective, to the school health class curriculum.

- One teen recommended inviting speakers to come and talk about how health care costs directly, and negatively, affected them.
- Teens discussed when it is appropriate for receive help with health care costs and when cost should be left to individuals.
 1. Teens generally concluded that individuals who are injured or have diseases that are not preventable, should have more help with health care costs.
 2. Two teens discussed and supported the idea of having each individual only pay for their own health care and not “burden” others.
- Teens strongly advocated that the community should take an active role in launching and ensuring the success of public health strategies. These strategies might be different from what we do today.
 1. Many teens concluded that if individuals adopted healthier eating and exercise habits, we would be healthier as a nation and health care costs would decrease.
- Teens suggested that people should be more strongly encouraged to spend more money on things like gym memberships instead of “unhealthy choices” like buying cigarettes.
- Teens largely discussed the idea that home and public gardens would be wildly beneficial to individual health. They suggested that these gardens would keep grocery costs down, which would be an incentive to adopt healthier habits.
- They suggested that community members could share and exchange backyard produce with one another.
- Teens also discussed the idea that these gardens would help greatly improve the quality of the produce offered to community members. Homegrown vegetables would reduce the amount of preservatives and chemicals that are consumed.
 1. As in previous weekly discussions, teens placed high value on educating community members about preventative care and other health care options, but this time related their suggestions to lowering society’s cost of care.

“I think the topic [of] ‘choices and cost of health care’ must be taught in health classes so students know how costs go up as they make bad choices. If they make good choices as a result we can benefit from it!” – Tanzim

“I had never thought about the idea of teaching the economics of health in health class. That seems like a really good idea. We learned how to stay healthy and the physical consequences of not being healthy, but we never learned about the economic consequences.” – Kevin

“Not only do we need to work on preventing people from taking up bad habits, but what about all the people who are already involved in them? They’re used as examples but it doesn’t seem like there is more of an effort being made to figure new methods of helping them... The US should fund prevention programs because although they would be costly, it wouldn’t compare to the amount of money we’re already spending on chronic diseases.” – Firi

- One teen suggested that the high cost of care can make people think they are getting higher quality care, but they might also be getting less efficient care.

“The part when [the author of a newspaper article] talked about how having a lot of doctors/medical personnel can cause inefficiency and raise cost reminded me of Leslie’s story (from a few weeks ago) of having to tell multiple doctors her story over and over again.” – Louise

Weekly Discussion #6: Kim Farris-Berg, Teen Citizen Solutions project facilitator, asked teens to reflect on the following five questions:

What are your summary recommendations for the Minnesota Health Care Task Force?

1. Considering everything we have discussed, and not just your own answers but everyone else’s, what are the most important things for the Task Force to understand/take into account from what teens have been saying on this project?

- Being a healthy individual is all about personal responsibility.
 1. Teens stated that we, as a society, do not prioritize health the way we should.
 2. Teens acknowledge that societal pressures (e.g. media, expectations of family and friends, etc.) can impact them negatively but, in the end, they stated very clearly that they are ultimately the only ones responsible for their health.
- Healthcare should be affordable.
 1. Teens stated that although some of their peers do not see the connection between health and cost, many do and they take it seriously.
- In order to succeed, people should have access to healthy foods and a safe environment.
- Be cautious and responsible in any promotion of a “normal/healthy” body type. Each person has a unique body type due

to a variety of factors unique to them. There is no such thing as a “normal” body type.

“I would like to see] ethnicity [taken into account]. Meaning that due to cultural, spiritual, and physical differences that the majority may or may not share, all factors need to be taken into consideration. Like African Americans are more prone to diabetes, high blood pressure, high blood sugar and many others. It could be our food choices or just the way our bodies are built. Also African Americans Body Mass Index tends to be higher, so when the “average weight” is not what one meets up to... POW RIGHT IN THE SELF ESTEEM!” – Leslie

“The word ‘normal’ here should be abolished, and instead be replaced with something like ‘ideal’; we each can set our own ideal body types that may not be similar to anyone else’s.” – Liz

“I agree there is no such thing as normal body type. When a person says, ‘I have normal body type,’ what does he/she mean? What makes a person’s body normal? Is it how body is shaped or how much muscle/fat you have? In my opinion, if you think your body is normal, then it is normal. If not, then no.” – Tanzim

- Health education can be improved.
 1. Teens primarily learn about health from health class. Therefore, according to the teens, steps should be taken to make health class more interactive and interesting.
 2. Educate teens (and adults) on the consequences of negative choices as well as the benefits of positive choices.
 3. Teach teens about the economics of health care and how their choices impact cost.
- Teens DO care and have opinions about health and health care. Respect what teens have to contribute to the dialog as equal members of the community.

“I wish more people knew that mental disease is more common than they would ever know. Not all the time [do] they live in ‘loony houses’ and [threaten] your survival. I want teens to know that [people with mental health issues] are people too with good heads on our shoulders... and that we are your neighbors, best friends, husbands, wives, teachers and so much more.” – Leslie

“The Task Force should understand that we are able to make good suggestions and good decisions. They should make sure to have a sense for what teens want before making decisions. They should also know that the generalization of a teenager doesn’t necessarily reflect our character. Adults agree that stereotyping is a bad thing, but they tend only to think of race or class. When it comes to age, they stereotype with the best of them. It’s easy to cast an image upon teenagers and decide that they don’t know what’s good for them or that they shouldn’t be given any voice in what is done for/to them. It’s harder, but much better an idea to realize that, although there are some teens do fit the bill, there are a lot of teenagers that care what goes on and what policies are passed on behalf of us.” – Kevin

2. Do you think teens’ experiences with health and health care (including not just medical visits, but your education and what you see and do now) could have a long-term impact on their use of and expectations for health care? How so (positive and/or negative impacts)? What can the Task Force learn from your answer?

- Health education is key to positive, long-term impacts. (100%)
 1. Well-rounded health education has the ability to, not only teach teens to understand and respect their bodies (i.e. what they put into them, how they exercise them, etc.), but also help teens use health care responsibly now and later in their lives.
 2. Furthermore, educating teens on how their choices directly impact society at large will only benefit the future of our nation’s health care system.

“Our schools need to place a larger emphasis on health education beyond the standard health curriculum. Health class isn’t just about the dangers of drugs; it is also about teaching students where to find healthy food, and how to make a healthy lifestyle sustainable. While teaching students how to cook does not fall under traditional health curriculum, simple skills like cooking and maintaining a vegetable garden can greatly influence one’s well being over time.” – Brett

- A healthy, positive environment at home, facilitated by the parents, greatly influences how seriously teens think about health and health care.
- Negative societal influences may have negative long-term impacts on health and health care.

“I’ve always felt that society and media have been tugging me in different directions with endorsement of

unhealthy things alongside with the push to be healthy (or at least their idea of “healthy”). It’s those lessons that are imprinted on us that we’re most likely to pass on to future generations.” – Firi

3. Is there anything you learned or discussed on Teen Citizen Solutions that you wish more people knew about? Why?

- Health care should be attainable for all.
- Living a healthy lifestyle is essential to leading a safe and happy life and dramatically decreasing the severity of health and health care issues that our nation is facing.
- Mental health is just as important as physical health.
- Why it is difficult for some people to afford or attain health care?
- Individuals of all ages need to understand the link between their choices and the cost of health care in order to stop “driving up costs,” especially for the other members of society who cannot afford health care.
 1. One teen shared her belief that, this kind of knowledge could motivate people to change bad habits.
- We need to have greater awareness of the food and nutrients (i.e. calorie content, sodium content, preservatives, etc.) that we put into our bodies in order to reduce obesity and raise the quality of personal health.

4. How, if at all, has your thinking changed or progressed over the course of your work on this project?

- Teens stated that their thoughts on health and/or health care have been changed and/or expanded through their work on the Teen Citizen Solutions project. (100%)

“My thinking has changed a lot over the course of my work on this project. I now know the importance of healthcare and health. I am more aware of my health now because of all the discussion.”

– Tanzim

- Two teens felt that this project helped them become more in touch with their own health. They also shared that they feel motivated to spread their awareness to others.
- Two teens shared that they now view health care very differently than before their participation in this project. They said that they now see health care as a two way street, between doctor and patient. Individual responsibility and accountability are key to a good health care system.
- One teen shared that the project helped shape her communication skills, specifically how to communicate their thoughts in writing.
- Teens also stated that they learned how capable their peers are. Some said they were surprised at how much teens, as a unit, have to offer.
 1. One teen said that he was glad to be “called out” by “a number of people” for making a generalization in one of his comments. He said that he is now more aware of himself and has progressed from that way of thinking.

“I’m still a bit surprised at how far the conversation has reached. Like Liz mentioned, there was a lot of different perspectives and that helped steer the conversation in to things that I would have never even thought would connect to health.” – Firi

“I was surprised at how much I and others contributed to the project. I didn’t really think I knew a lot about health care. I think often times when people think of health care they think of only the business end of it and not the actual care part. I know I did.”

– Kevin

5. What, if anything, have you learned about your own capacity for civic participation and active citizenship from being a part of Teen Citizen Solutions?

- Some teens talked about feeling “intimidated” when they first joined the project but soon after they began working alongside their peers, they felt “empowered” to share their opinions, insights, and experiences. Furthermore, many teens said that they now feel that EVERYONE has the ability to change their surroundings and influence things for the better. Teens said that they and their peers should become more active in their communities and many said that they are looking forward to applying what they learned, by being apart of Teen Citizen Solutions, to their own lives and sharing that information with their communities.

“I have realized that teens in general are an important part of policy making. They think differently than adults, and often, I think, are more flexible in their views, therefore being able to think more creatively than adults. This creativity is especially important when it comes to problem solving and planning for the future. It’s something that society often doesn’t give us credit for.” – Louise

“Over the course of this project I have become more aware of what other people’s opinions are... Now I can compare and contrast my beliefs to others and come out with a more clear view of the issue at hand. I have learned that I have a voice (a pretty powerful one at that) and that it matters what I say.” – Leslie

“I think this project empowers youth in developing a healthier society. By receiving questions from ‘experts,’ and being able to speak through experience I feel, just as I’m sure other Teen Citizen Solutions youth feels, valued... In a way, I am intimidated by spelling & grammar, adult questions, and addressing health care issues. However, I know I am not alone and am not the only ‘young person’ in the project, so I feel empowered by the other participants. I know that by reading what other youth have to say about their ideas about improving health and health care issues, it only encourages me to participate more and I feel like I am contributing once I start to write my thoughts.” – Oscar

“I have established my sense of duty as well as citizenship (whether to a community, group, or project). Being part of an active project not only is interesting and an enjoyable experience, but also gives me a sense of responsibility.” – Liz

Summaries of Three Open Discussions

Open Discussion #1: After taking a quiz available on the Smart Balance Web site called “How Active Are You Really?” teens described their reactions to the quiz and defined what it means to be “active.” The quiz is available at: <http://www.smartbalance.com/nutrition/articles/20100611/quiz-how-active-are-you-really>

- Teens were surprised by their quiz scores. They believed the quiz focused on too narrow a definition of “active” and that their scores should have been higher based on activities and other healthy choices they make that were not asked in this quiz.
 1. Examples of items that were overlooked include: Jobs that require physical activity such as serving in a restaurant or working with young children. Also, team sports and dance classes.
 2. Some teens said that the quiz should have asked about how many sedentary hours you spend in a day and not “how many hours of TV do you watch.” Some very active people also watch a lot of TV; sometimes they watch TV while being active!
 3. Teens were pleased, however, that the quiz did include “everyday” activities that can be easily incorporated into daily routines, such as child care and chores.
 4. Teens were also pleased that the quiz included yoga and Pilates in addition to traditional cardiovascular and strength training exercises. Options like these are not often available to them for physical education, but can be easier on the body and more appealing to some.
- One quarter of the teen participants suggested that if a quiz were to be directed at teens, it ought to include questions about whether they limit activity because of homework and related stress as well as whether they stop being active because they are not “good enough” to compete with peers.
 1. Some teens expressed that they prioritize school work over eating healthy and/or exercise (such as going to the gym and sports practices). One teen said she and some peers have dropped out of sports all together because academics are “top priority.”
 2. o Some teens said that as they’ve gotten older they have lost the drive to be active for the sake of being active. If their ability isn’t worthy of being on a high school team, or if they are not at the top of their peer group in physical education classes, or if they are inexperienced, then they don’t feel there is a place for them. So they stop being active.

“I think that in high school where you are so pressured into cliques, it’s harder to try new sports to get into shape. Say you want to join the basketball team to get into shape but you have never played before. You are most likely going to be an outsider and feel a little rejected. And of course you aren’t going to be in perfect shape and be as athletically skilled in the game as everybody else. If you haven’t been in a sport your entire life, the likelihood of you joining one when you get to high school is very slim. Whether it’s because you aren’t in shape or because you are afraid of being the outsider.” – Alyssa

“I mean, in high school, I think it would have been really hard for me to join a running club, but hiking and biking, most definitely. Now, I’d join all three. I think that now, in college, more than ever... I need that escape sometimes.” – Hannah

Open Discussion #2: Given teens’ reporting that mental health is an important, yet overlooked, aspect of teen health, we asked them to take a look at an article titled, “School Counselors in Short Supply in Minnesota” by Tim Post at Minnesota

The questions were: Do you think more school counselors are needed? And, if so, what should be their role? Is your idea about their role different than what school counselors do now?

- Teens said that they agree school counselors are in short supply.
 1. Three teens reported, specifically, that their schools have very few counselors. Two students reported one counselor to every four-hundred students while another reported one counselor to every eight-hundred students.
- Teens shared that counselors are an important resource for teens struggling with mental and emotional health.
 1. Some students cited personal issues and said that they would have benefited from counseling. Others mentioned tragedies at their schools that could have been prevented, or will hopefully be prevented in the future, by increased counseling resources.

“Seeing a counselor is like going to your happy place, your safe haven, your home away from home. It’s a place where you can be yourself and not have to worry about the piercing glares, and judging faces. It’s a place where you can just let go.” – Elaine

“I really do believe we need more (specialized) counselors at school to advise and aid us with personal problems. I understand counselors are trained to play a variety of roles but I think we need more people that we’re comfortable around and that we can build a stronger connection with to be available. Especially at a time when depression and suicide rates are on the rise. It could really be the difference that saves a lot of lives.” – Firi

- The majority of teens said that they did not/do not feel comfortable approaching their school counselor(s) about a wide variety of issues from help with academic decisions to personal problems.
 1. One student said that he felt that if he approached his school counselor and asked questions, she would become upset with him.
 2. Another student said that she felt like a “burden” because the counselor had a very large student load.

“Counselors can talk about grades, life events, financial hardships and other useful things... Counselors should be friendlier so students can approach without any fear.” – Tanzim

Open Discussion #3: Given teens’ reporting about health taking a back seat to their daily schedules and responsibilities, we asked them to consider an excerpt from an article titled “Eating in Ignorance” by Norman Wirzba. Wirzba, a professor, had asked his students to examine their favorite food and then report to the class what’s in it, its calorie content, and how marketing influences what people think about the food. We asked teens to examine these aspects of their own favorite foods and report back. Several took on the challenge.

- Teens said that marketing can make food look healthier than it is, and cause them to think about eating unhealthy foods even when they wouldn’t otherwise think of it.
- Teens and adults reported that they didn’t often think about the calories in their beverages, specifically blended coffee drinks (Frappuccino) and juice smoothies. The fat and calories are much higher than people suspect.
- Sodium content is something teens don’t think a lot about, and the level of sodium in their favorite foods was shocking to them.
 1. One teen said that a lot of her friends eat ramen noodles without realizing that they are eating a week’s worth of sodium in one sitting.
 2. Another teen said she was surprised to learn that her favorite soup and sandwich meal contained three-thousand milligrams of sodium.
- One teen reflected on the SLICE Act, for School Lunch Improvements for Children’s Education, which Representative Jared Polis (D-Colo.) introduced in response to congressional action last fall ensuring that two tablespoons of tomato paste slathered on pizza could continue to be classified as a full vegetable serving in the federal school lunch program. The teen said that decisions like making pizza a vegetable, and what kind of “real” fruits and vegetables ARE offered, contribute to teens’ understanding about what is and is not healthy food and what healthy food tastes like. The teen said he loves apples but would never buy the low-quality apples offered in his school, but if those are teens’ understanding of apples then he can understand why teens don’t find them appealing. This teen also suggested the idea of teaching teens how to plant and maintain vegetable gardens at school by growing actual vegetable gardens and serving the food.

“Teaching students how to be more sustainable while being healthy seems like a much better idea than pizza as a vegetable.” – Brett

Teen Citizen Solutions Participation Outreach

The Teen Citizen Solutions team reached out to all of the following schools and organizations with information to inform the teens they work with about the opportunity to influence the future of health and health care in Minnesota.

American Anthropological Association
Annex Teen Clinic
Anthony Middle School
Apple Valley High School
Avalon School
Beacons Project in Minneapolis
Children's Hospitals Youth Council
Cities of Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center
City of Minneapolis Youth Congress
City of St. Paul and to the Center for Youth Development
College Possible
Coon Rapids High School
Crosslake Community School
Eagan High School
Earth Force
Eden Prairie High School
EdVisions Schools (a network of 14 chartered schools throughout the state)
Highland Park Middle School
Humboldt Secondary School
Luverne Public School
Minnesota Alliance for Youth
Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs (a network of 300 schools throughout the state)
Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association
Minnesota Future Problem Solving Program
Minnesota Online High School
Minnesota State High School Coaches Association
National Youth Leadership Council
NYLC's Youth Advisory Council
Northeast Middle School
Shine On! Young Leaders Rising
South High School
St. Louis County Schools
St. Paul Central High School
The Minnesota Alliance for Student Achievement
Thief River Falls Public Schools
Washburn High School
World Savvy
Youthrive
Youthprise