

Challenge to Counties: Be Healthier

Take a look! The 9th annual County Health Rankings came out in mid-March. This nationwide Rankings report describes the overall health of each county (www.countyhealthrankings.org). In Nebraska, our counties are ranked from 1 (healthiest) to 80 (least healthy). Thirteen Nebraska counties were too small for reliable data, so were not ranked.

These rankings can help counties understand what factors are influencing the health of their residents. There is a ranking for health outcomes (based on length of life and quality of life) and a ranking for health factors (health behaviors, access to and quality of health care, various social and economic factors, and the physical environment).

We have room to improve! We aren't the best and we aren't the worst of the counties ranked in Nebraska. Among South Heartland's counties of Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster, our best county for health outcomes ranks 25th in the state and our best county for health factors ranks 28th.

Let's look at some of the strengths. One area of strength common to all four South Heartland counties is the low unemployment rate. In addition, Adams County has very good high school graduation rates. Clay County has a relatively low percentage of children in poverty and no severe housing problems. Nuckolls County has access to primary care physicians and residents have strong social connections. Webster County has a high percentage of residents with some college education and had no alcohol-impaired driving deaths during the reporting period.

But each of the four South Heartland counties also has areas of opportunity. So, how can we move up in the rankings?

One role of a public health department is to help our communities identify health issues (for example, with the County Health Rankings report) and set health goals. The County Health Rankings report shows that Adult Obesity is one outcome that has room for improvement in all four of our counties.

We know that obesity is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease and diabetes, so the South Heartland District Health Department sets goals to help more people learn if they are at risk for developing these diseases and to that ensure proven programs, such as Smart Moves Diabetes Prevention Program, and the YMCA's Self-Monitored Blood Pressure Program are available for people wanting to make lifestyle changes to prevent these diseases.

South Heartland is working to prevent obesity by improving access to and promoting healthy foods and beverages in grocery stores, food pantries and vending machines. We are encouraging adoption of worksite wellness policies that support employees to be physically active at work. We are facilitating

community efforts to design walking routes and paths to make it easier to be physically active in the community.

The health department partners with many other organizations and government agencies to address health improvement opportunities together. In 'public health language' we say that one of our jobs is to be the 'chief health strategist' for our communities.

The local public health system is not just your local South Heartland District Health Department. The public health system also includes governmental services, elected leaders, schools and colleges, hospitals, and healthcare and behavioral health providers. It includes faith-based, civic and human services organizations. It includes businesses and worksites, behavioral health providers, non-profits, agriculture producers, volunteers, and the many others who contribute in large and small ways to the public's health.

And, because we work together, our local public health system has many local achievements to be proud of. We are containing and preventing infectious diseases and we are helping people to receive vaccinations for preventable diseases. We are facilitating safer and healthier workplaces. We are improving access to healthier foods. We are providing services to support healthier moms and babies.

We are also collaborating on preparedness for natural disasters and public health emergencies, such as pandemic flu. We are initiating healthy school policies and action plans that lead to healthier young people. We are reducing exposure to environmental hazards, such as lead and radon. We are improving screening for chronic diseases and cancer.

We are helping individuals and families to access health care and behavioral health services, safe and affordable housing, and other basic services. And, we are empowering individuals in all walks of life to live healthy lifestyles.

So, maybe Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties aren't at the top of the County Health Rankings, but working together with the right partners and policymakers, the public health system will help our next generation be healthier than the one before.

Check out the County Health Rankings and consider how you or your organization can take action to help your county be healthier.

For more information about your county's health ranking, visit: <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/>.

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