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## Teaming up for better health

*By Rhonda Siebecker Star-Times*

Sometimes, it's possible to turn a negative into a positive. That's what a newly formed group is hoping to do concerning the county's health.

According to Barb Theis, health officer for the Juneau County Health Department, a study from over a year ago, listing Juneau County as the unhealthiest county in Wisconsin and an article by former Star-Times reporter Tim Damos served as "wake-up calls" to concerned residents, who decided to take action.

"Businesses stood up and took notice," Theis said of the survey, which measures factors such as teen birth rate, smoking during pregnancy and non-completion of high school educations in measuring health of the county.

She said the health department is now excited to announce their award of a development grant to improve the health of Juneau County residents. "It will ask for strong partnerships from Juneau County businesses, healthcare systems, governmental officials, education, clergy, public health, media and community members to develop a county-wide health improvement plan and identify evidence-based programs needed to improve the health of Juneau County residents," Theis said.

The grant project "Creating Healthy Rural Communities" was funded by the University of Wisconsin, School of Medicine and Public Health.

"Our application was successful because of the strong interest, participation and support we received from engaged stakeholders in the community," said Theis. "Juneau County's health problems are neither new nor surprising, but the motivation spurred by the 2006 Wisconsin County Health Rankings report that ranked our county as the unhealthiest in the state (on the bottom of a list of 72 counties) has been overwhelming. This grant will reward our county's enthusiasm with resources to efficiently and effectively determine together what issues should be our focus to make us a healthy rural community."

She said the \$59,000 grant is very competitive and the county is fortunate to have received it.

"Not every county can take something very negative and turn it around," Theis said.

In January 2007, the Juneau County Board of Health asked a new local committee to look for innovative solutions to address the health of Juneau County residents in light of the 2006 Wisconsin County Health Rankings Report. "The committee quickly mobilized, seriously considered options and decided to apply for the development grant," Theis said. "The local committee felt strongly that having an academic partnership with the University of Wisconsin, School of Medicine and Public Health would provide Juneau County with needed additional resources (and health research) to give us our best hope of making a difference in the health of our residents. The committee felt that at some point we needed to find out what research has shown that objectively works to improve health."

She said there is not going to be a "quick fix," when it comes to improving the health of the county, but she is confident the group will be able to determine what areas (socioeconomics, health behaviors, access to health care and physical environments) need to see improvement.

Theis said she is "delighted" to have Barbara Duerst, RN, MS, as the academic partner from the UW-School of Medicine and Public Health. Duerst is no stranger to Juneau County or to population health, because she has been instrumental in a variety of health needs assessments throughout the state, according to Theis. In fact, as Director of the Office of Rural Health, Duerst assisted with the 2002 Juneau County Health Needs Assessment. Duerst will serve as an advisor for the project, bringing cutting-edge research and evidence-based community development practices to the county. She will serve as the liaison between Juneau County and the UW-School of Medicine and Public Health.

Carol Roth of Starfish Consulting Inc. will be working with the Juneau County Health Department as the Project Director for the Crating Health Rural Communities project. "Carol has many years of evaluation and consulting experience and will be a strong asset in meeting the objectives of the grant," Theis said.

Theis said the Board of Health and the Juneau County Health Department are especially grateful to the individuals and organizations who submitted letters of support. They included:

Paul Schaller, president, Greater Mauston Area Development Corp., James M. O'Keefe, president and CEO of Mile Bluff Medical Center, Art Keenan, superintendent of Wonewoc-Center Schools, Kathleen Metzenbauer, Family Living Agent of the UW-Extension, John Hamm, chairman of the Juneau County Agricultural Industrial and Recreational Society, Inc., Nancy E.B. Ness, MD Medical Director for Mile Bluff Clinic LLP, Mary Young, director Division of Public Health, southern region and Jim Waller, Mauston campus administrator for Western Technical College.

"The 2006 Wisconsin County Health Rankings have created a spark in Juneau County," Theis said. "It is obvious that Juneau County does not want to be 72nd! This grant provides communities, health care delivery systems, governmental public health, employers and business, academia and the media with the opportunity to work together. It has the potential to improve the health of Juneau County residents in a significant way."

She added, "It's an opportunity to work together to come up with a health plan that will have a significant impact on the community."

Any Juneau County individual or organization interested in participating in the grant project can contact Theis at 608-847-9373.