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Report: County residents' live longer, but habits lag

BY KRISTOPHER WENN • HERALD TIMES REPORTER • NOVEMBER 22, 2008

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MANITOWOC — A new report shows county residents are living longer, but that could be in danger if they maintain unhealthy habits, the county's top health official said Thursday.

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Jim Blaha said areas in need of greatest improvement are "the ones people can do themselves."

Blaha said his health department can offer programs, but residents should look at the report and say, "we are not doing so good, we should take a walk, quit smoking."

Manitowoc County was ranked 27th out of Wisconsin's 72 counties in health outcomes this year, according to the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute's sixth annual report.

The county had been ranked 41st in that measure in 2005, the report said.

County residents were calculated to have relatively low rates of premature deaths, but a substantial number of residents said they were in fair to poor health, the report said.

But residents continue to have a high rate of obesity, binge drinking, smoking and children affected by smoking and lead-poisoned homes, according to the report.

A relatively high number of residents had health insurance and they likely were taking advantage of mammograms, diabetic care and other services, the report noted.

Blaha said his office often refers uninsured residents to the state's Badger Care program and family planning for health services.

A free medical clinic also is being considered locally, he said.

Other programs through the Healthiest Manitowoc County 2010 initiative have helped offer more services, he said.

The initiative has worked on physical activity programs for children, improved school lunches, school-based dental clinics, work-health assessments and worksite wellness plans.

"In years past people would come into the health department with a specific program and a nurse would talk to them," Blaha said. "Now, the nurses go out ... and are trying to raise the awareness of children and adults."

But the report showed county residents still lagging behind in health habits and environmental health quality.

The county ranks 39th in those factors this year, down from a 26th rank in 2005, the report said.

County residents are in the top half of the state in social and economic health factors.

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The county had relatively high rates of education, marriage and relatively low unemployment, the report said.

Blaaha said some figures used in the rankings aren't as current as others.

To view the report, go on the Web to www.pophealth.wisc.edu/UWPHI/research/rankings_2008/rankings_2008.htm.

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