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Most Popular this Week

Official: Health ranking also a sign of limited funding

By Kevin Kirkpatrick, Daily Register | Posted: Monday, December 1, 2008 9:45 pm

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A Marquette County official says limited funding for health care and an unwillingness by residents to take advantage of services that do exist are to blame for the recent poor showing in a statewide health survey.

Meanwhile, Columbia County's improved ranking is credited to a number of health-related policies and programs it offers.

Marquette ranked 71st overall out of 72 counties and the city of Milwaukee. Marquette fell from 70th last year. It was 65th in 2006, 64th in 2005 and 62nd in 2004.

Columbia County ranks 21st healthiest, improving from 32nd last year. It was 48th in 2006, 52nd in 2005, and 54th in 2004.

"This means that in the county less people are dying before age 75 and less people report being in fair or poor health compared to other counties in the state," said Susan Lorenz, a public health officer for Columbia County Health and Human Services.

There is only one operational health clinic and no hospital in the county, said Nathan Luedke, director of the Marquette County Department of Health.

"A lack of health care does not cause health decline, but a lack of use does," Luedke said. "Prevention is key to being and remaining healthy."

The sixth annual University of Wisconsin-Madison study was released last month. It summarizes the current health of the counties as well as the factors that contribute to health - such as access to health care, health behaviors, socioeconomic status and physical environment.

Ozaukee, Waukesha and Dane counties are the healthiest in the state, according to the study.

Marquette ranked near the bottom (70) in health behaviors and below average (58) for socioeconomic factors, including income and education. For access to health care and quality of outpatient care, it placed 71st out of 73.

Marquette also ranked low in obesity (72nd), number of people involved in a crash per 1,000 population (71st), and no dentist visit in the past year (70th).

"We'll focus more of our attention on prevention and continue to offer more primary care services," Luedke said.

Marquette received an above-average ranking (19) for physical environment, which takes into account air and water quality and environmental risks such as lead and radon.

Its best rankings are for lead-poisoned children (1st), radon risk (2nd), and violent crime rate per 100,000 population (9th).

The health department uses the county's above-average physical environment ranking as the focus in several health programs: No Families Left Inside promotes healthy eating, physical exercise and reading and Healthy Communities, Healthy Youth strives to reduce tobacco and alcohol use in children by promoting other alternative activities.

Luedke says the county can improve its ranking.

"The key to understand is that this ranking is everyone's problem," he said. "Anything you do to improve your lifestyle, will improve your health."

In Columbia County, Lorenz said cities and counties can play a significant role in improving health through the adoption of programs and policies, although she could not point to specific actions or programs that have led to the improved rankings.

Columbia's best ranking was for socioeconomic factors, where it placed 22nd. It ranked 46th in physical environment, 52nd in health behaviors and 53rd in health care.

The county was last in one category: number of people involved in a crash per 1,000 population. Its best ranking is seventh, for percentage of children in poverty.

Lorenz said that schools, businesses, health-care delivery systems and law enforcement need to work together in

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order for the county to continue to move up in the state's health rankings.

"It is my hope that the information included in the state's health rankings will engage community stakeholders in taking action to improve public health in Columbia County and Wisconsin," she said. "Government public health organizations are just one of many stakeholders accountable for the health of Wisconsin residents. There is a need for collaboration across various sectors in order to successfully improve the health of Columbia County and Wisconsin."

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