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Jefferson County is getting healthier

By Diane Graff of the Daily Times staff

While Ozaukee County is the healthiest county in the state, Jefferson County is slowly moving up the list, according to the newly released 2008 Wisconsin County Health Rankings.

The study ranks Jefferson County in the top quartile of the state's counties in health. Dodge County ranks in the middle of all counties.

The report is the sixth annual "health checkup" of the 72 counties and the city of Milwaukee, developed by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.

"The annual report ranks each county by certain health parameters," Watertown Health Officer Carol Quest said. "It can be a very valuable tool when you look at the populations."

The report is used to identify areas that need to be worked on and the information on the rankings is used for assessments, Quest said.

Earlier this year, the health departments of Watertown and Dodge and Jefferson counties finished the latest assessments and identified three main priorities. Those priorities are primary and preventive health care; mental health and mental disorders; and overweight, obesity and lack of physical activity. "It takes a lot of work and it is not an easy fix," Quest said. "It takes different activities to bridge the gap with these needs," she added.

"Overall, I find these statistics interesting," the health officer said. "In public health, we always look at populations and look at areas where we can make improvements. I see it as a challenge to work with the community to make improvements."

According to the institute's director, Dr. Patrick Remington, "We bring together over 30 measures of health to summarize the overall health of each county in Wisconsin."

The report revealed significant differences between the healthiest places such as Ozaukee, Waukesha, Dane, Iowa and Eau Claire counties, and the least healthy places such as Menominee County, city of Milwaukee, Marquette, Juneau and Forest counties.

"The health of a community is determined by a number of factors, such as health insurance, smoking rates, high school graduation and air quality," Remington said.

The 12-page report used two factors to measure the level of overall health or "health outcomes" by county, the rate of premature death (dying before the age of 75) and the percent of people who report being in fair or poor health. Health behaviors is also considered, such as cigarette smoking, alcohol use and health during pregnancy, Quest said. The information is obtained through hospital reports, emergency room reports and coroner reports, she added.

The report then analyzes several factors in four major categories that can affect a community's health, such as health care, health behaviors, social and economic factors, and the physical environment.

Jefferson County ranked 13th in health outcomes and 37th in health determinants. Dodge County ranked 38th in outcomes and 33rd in determinants.

In health outcomes, Jefferson County ranked 19th in 2007; 15th in 2006; fifth in 2005; and 16th in 2004.

Dodge County also ranked 38th last year; 28th in 2006; 39th in 2005; and 37th in 2004.

In general health status, people reporting fair or poor health in Dodge County ranked 45th, compared to 14th in Jefferson County.

Among the categories of health determinants, Jefferson County scored in the top quarter in health care with rank of 13 and Dodge County ranked 39th; Dodge County fared better in socioeconomic factors, with a rank of 23 and Jefferson County ranked 28.

Both counties were low in health behaviors with ranks of 57 in Jefferson County and 46 in Dodge County.

In physical environment, Jefferson County ranked 45 and Dodge County ranked 34.

"I have problems with rankings in that they seem to sometimes be all over the place," Dodge County Public Health Officer Jody Langfeldt said. "What is healthy to one person may not be good health to another," she said. "I think there are some issues on how they put all of this together."

"The hardest part is seeing some of these things and knowing you are not able to address them," Langfeldt said. "So much of this depends on the choices an individual makes," she said. "We try to encourage people to make better decisions."

Langfeldt said she shares the report with members of the county's human services and health board.

"The institute's annual health ranking is an important tool for communities to begin to assess and improve their health," Dr. Robert Golden, dean of the UW School of Medicine and Public Health, said. "These reports can be used as a call to action. While access to high quality health care is key to improving health, we must work together to improve health-related behaviors, to increase the level of education and income for our most vulnerable citizens and to improve the social and physical environment within Wisconsin."