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Officials: Wisconsin residents' health has room for improvement

BY AMY OLSON • WAUSAU DAILY HERALD • NOVEMBER 22, 2008

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Wisconsin has made progress in its battle to combat its toughest public health problems, but much more work must be done, officials say.

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The state is revising its 10-year plan, called Healthiest Wisconsin 2020, to improve the health and safety of its residents, said Margaret Schmelzer, director of the project. About 30 people from public health agencies, local health systems and local governments offered their input Thursday during a forum in Wausau for the best ways to try to meet the project's goals.

Local input is critical to identifying health priorities across the state, said Julie Willems Van Dijk, Marathon County's health officer.

About 77 percent of Wisconsin residents do not eat enough fruits and vegetables each day, and 44.5 percent of residents are not physically active enough, according to a new report by the University of Wisconsin's Institute on Population Health in Madison. Improving nutrition and physical activity, reducing tobacco and alcohol use, and lowering the risks of environmental hazards and infectious diseases ought to remain priorities through 2020, Schmelzer said.

"The priorities we're seeing aren't quick fixes," said Sue Gantner, director of prevention and research at the Aspirus Heart and Vascular Institute. Over time, however, changes in behaviors could go a long way toward reducing illnesses and premature deaths.

No one agency or health system can tackle the problems alone, said Laura Scudiere, executive director of Bridge Community Health Clinic in Wausau.

"Collaboration is the key to good public health," said Scudiere, who was glad to see that mental and dental health are receiving more attention.

The state has made progress since the plan first was developed in 1990, said Pat Guhleman, director of the state's Bureau of Health Policy. She pointed to the continuing decline of tobacco use and exposure to second-hand smoke as two areas of success.

Schmelzer said the task force plans to present its recommendations to state Health Secretary Karen Timberlake on Dec. 12. The plan is expected to be put into effect in 2010.

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