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Environmental health report overlooks efforts, officials say

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

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Local health officials said a report citing the region's low quality of environmental health highlights areas for improvement but fails to note efforts under way.

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The 2008 County Health Rankings, released Thursday by the University of Wisconsin's Population Health Institute in Madison, suggest environmental health in Lincoln, Marathon, Portage and Wood counties ranks in the bottom quarter of Wisconsin's 72 counties.

Though health behaviors, socioeconomic factors and physical environment were not factored into rankings, researchers did make public the data to show how counties compared, said Dr. Patrick Remington, the study's lead author and director of the institute.

"The health of a community is determined by many factors," Remington said. While socioeconomic status and health behaviors play a larger role, the physical environment and availability of health care affect people's health.

The report looked at air quality data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state's Department of Natural Resources, nitrate levels in water, percentage of houses built before 1950 (which are more likely to contain lead from paint) and radon risk, measured in the percentage of homes screened and found to have elevated radon levels.

In Marathon County, about 22 percent of homes tested for radon had elevated levels, compared with 12 percent throughout the state; about 17 percent of Lincoln County homes had elevated radon levels, while Portage and Wood counties had about 15 percent and 14 percent of homes with high levels of the radioactive gas.

"We know, geologically, we're at risk for radon," said Susan Kunferman, Wood County health officer, adding that the increased awareness in the county likely triggers more people to get their homes tested. But the report's measurement did not reflect how many people have taken steps to reduce their risks to exposure.

Similarly, the estimate for lead exposure did not reflect efforts to test for and safely abate risks from lead paint, said Julie Willems Van Dijk, Marathon County's health officer.

The findings can help local boards of health identify priorities and find strategies to address them, said Shelley Hersil, Lincoln County Health

Department director.

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How we fared

*Results are in percentages

County	Lincoln	Marathon	Portage	Wood
Nitrates in water	80.8	50.4	84.2	59.8
Housing with increased lead risk	35.5	31	25.2	29.2
Lead poisoned children	1.4	1	0.4	0.2
Radon risk	16.6	22.4	15.1	14.1
Commuting solo	78.4	81.1	78.5	82.2

Source: 2008 County Health Rankings, University of Wisconsin-Madison Population Health Institute

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