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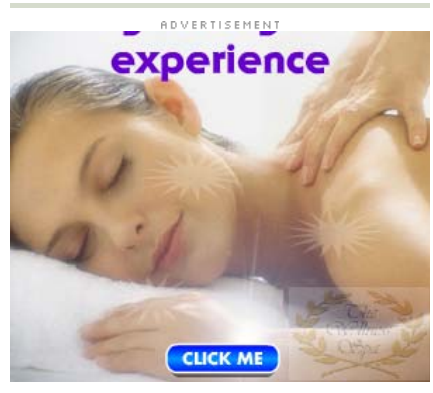
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# Marathon County ranks in top 20 in Population Health Institute report

BY AMY OLSON • WAUSAU DAILY HERALD • NOVEMBER 20, 2008

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Three central Wisconsin counties rank among the top quarter in the state for their low rates of premature death and good quality of health, according to a new report.



Marathon, Portage and Wood counties ranked in the top 20 overall, according to the University of Wisconsin's Population Health Institute in Madison. Lincoln County ranked No. 41.

Researchers looked at rates of death before age 75 and the percentage of people reporting their health status as fair or poor as part of a national health study to determine the health rank.

The intent was to highlight the disparities between counties throughout the state and help communities better assess and improve their health status, said Dr. Patrick Remington, director of the PHI.

"These reports can be used as a call to action,"

said Dr. Robert Golden, dean of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health in Madison. More must be done to improve people's health behaviors and the physical environment to foster good health, he said.

The report uses much of the same data Marathon County uses in its own health assessment, but it offers comparisons that can help officials gauge change, said Julie Willems Van Dijk, the county's health officer. Both documents highlight the importance of factors such as education and income and show that health "is bigger than medical care."

The findings have prompted Wood County officials to talk with those in other counties about their efforts to bolster health in areas in which Wood County has lagged, said Susan Kunferman, Wood County health officer.

Though not included in the rankings, the researchers assessed factors such as health care and lack of health insurance, behaviors such as smoking and inactivity, socioeconomic factors and the physical environment.

Marathon, Wood and Portage counties ranked Nos. 2, 3 and 4, respectively, for health care; Lincoln County ranked No. 32. None of the four counties ranked near the bottom for physical environmental factors such as nitrate levels in water.

The report's findings have some limitations, Willems Van Dijk said. For instance, Marathon County and central Wisconsin are known for having high radon levels, though Marathon County's No. 72 ranking for radon exposure lacks context about efforts to abate the problem.

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