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Portage County ranks well on health list

Report shows disparities between areas in Wisconsin

*By Amy Olson
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Three central Wisconsin counties ranked in the top quarter in the state for 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, while Adams and Juneau counties are in the bottom 10, according to the University of Wisconsin's Population Health Institute in Madison.

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

The intent was to highlight the disparities between places throughout the state and help communities assess and improve health, said Dr. Patrick Remington, director of the university's Population Health Institute.

Dr. Robert Golden, dean of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health in Madison, said the report can be used as a call to action.

Though helpful, the findings are only one tool, said Susan Kunferman, Wood County's health officer.

"We don't put all our eggs in the county health ranking basket," she said.

The findings have prompted Wood County to talk with other counties about their efforts to bolster health in areas where Wood County, No. 17 on the list, has lagged.

Adams County was No. 63 out of the 73 counties in the state with Juneau at No. 69.

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

Marathon, Wood and Portage counties ranked Nos. 2, 3 and 4, respectively, for health care. None of the four counties ranked in the bottom for physical environmental factors such as nitrate levels in water.