

Our Challenge: Be the Healthiest

Have you heard? The annual County Health Rankings came out last week. The Rankings measure the current overall health of each county. In Nebraska, our counties are ranked from 1 (healthiest) to 78, with 15 Nebraska counties not ranked.

These rankings help counties understand what factors are influencing the health of their residents. There is a ranking for health outcomes (based on length of life and quality of life) and a ranking for health factors (health behaviors, access/quality of health care, various social and economic factors, and the physical environment).

We have room to improve! We aren't the best and we aren't the worst of the counties ranked in Nebraska. Among South Heartland's counties of Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster, our best county for health outcomes ranks 10th in the state and our best county for health factors ranks 29th.

So, how can we move up in the rankings?

One role of a public health department is to help our communities identify health issues and set health goals. If we know that many of the homes in our communities are testing high for radon gas, we might set goals to educate people about how to test for radon and what to do if radon levels are high, and we might work with cities and counties to adopt radon-resistant new construction codes. (We are doing this in South Heartland).

If we know that cardiovascular disease and diabetes are among the top causes of death in our counties, we might set goals to help people learn if they are at risk for developing these diseases and to that ensure proven programs, such as Smart Moves Diabetes Prevention Program, are available for people wanting to make lifestyle changes to prevent these diseases. (We are also doing this in South Heartland)

The health department partners with many other organizations and government agencies to address health improvement opportunities together. In 'public health language' we say that one of our jobs is to be the 'chief health strategist' for our communities.

The local public health system is not just your local South Heartland District Health Department. The public health system also includes governmental services, elected leaders, schools and colleges, hospitals, and healthcare and behavioral health providers. It includes faith-based,

civic and human services organizations. It includes businesses and worksites, behavioral health providers, non-profits, agriculture producers, volunteers, and the many others who contribute in large and small ways to the public's health.

And, because we work together, our local public health system has many local achievements to be proud of. We are containing and preventing infectious diseases and we are helping people to receive vaccinations for preventable diseases. We are facilitating safer and healthier workplaces. We are improving access to and promotion of healthier foods in groceries, food pantries and vending machines. We are providing services to support healthier moms and babies.

We are also collaborating on preparedness for natural disasters and public health emergencies, such as pandemic flu. We are initiating healthy school policies and action plans that lead to healthier young people. We are reducing exposure to environmental hazards, such as lead and radon. We are improving screening for chronic diseases and cancer.

We are encouraging physical activity by developing trails and parks, and expanding green spaces in our communities. We are helping individuals and families to access health care and behavioral health services, safe and affordable housing, and other basic services. And, we are empowering individuals in all walks of life to live healthy lifestyles.

So, maybe we aren't at the top of the County Health Rankings – YET. But working together with the right partners and policymakers, the public health system will help our next generation be healthier than the one before.

South Heartland District Health Department is honored that the Mayor of the City of Hastings, the Webster County Board of Commissioners, and the Adams County Board of Supervisors are encouraging local health improvement actions by signing proclamations for National Public Health Week (April 3-9). They are calling upon residents to observe Public Health Week by helping families, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and leaders contribute to the national goal of "Healthiest Nation 2030" and suggesting we all take action to move our own communities and counties forward toward being the "Healthiest County" or "Healthiest City" in Nebraska.

*For more information about your county's health ranking, visit: <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/>.
For more public health facts and information about National Public Health Week visit <http://nphw.org>.*

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