



***Improving Health in Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster Counties***

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**South Heartland Challenge to Counties: Be Healthier**

In a national health study called the County Health Rankings, Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties ranged widely in their standing among Nebraska counties for the overall quality and length of residents' lives, the executive director of the South Heartland District Health Department said Friday.

Dr. Michele Bever said these county results, which for Nebraska are ranked from 1 (healthiest) to 80 (least healthy, with 13 counties too small to be ranked), demonstrated that the South Heartland counties each had strengths to be proud of and opportunities to improve.

"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 to and quality of health care, various social and economic factors, and the physical environment)," Bever said.

"One area of strength common to all four South Heartland counties is the low unemployment rate," Bever said. "In addition, Adams County has a very good high school graduation rate while Clay County has a relatively low percentage of children in poverty and no severe housing problems," she said.

"In our two south counties, Nuckolls County has good access to primary care physicians and the residents have strong social connections," Bever said, "and Webster County has a high percentage of residents with some college education and had zero alcohol-impaired driving deaths during the reporting period."

"These results don't necessarily mean that the health of any of our counties is better or worse than previous years," she said, "because a county's rank can change if other counties in Nebraska are making improvements faster than our counties are."

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's annual County Health Rankings report ([www.countyhealthrankings.org](http://www.countyhealthrankings.org)) provides counties with information for taking action, the health director said. "It helps counties know what areas they are doing well in and what areas have the most opportunity for improvement."

"Just like we saw in last year's County Health Rankings report, all four South Heartland counties could improve their rankings by focusing on reducing adult smoking rates and adult obesity, since these lead to chronic disease, shorter lives, and higher healthcare costs," said Dr. Bever.

“We know that obesity is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease and diabetes,” Bever said, “so the South Heartland District Health Department sets goals to help more people learn if they are at risk for developing these diseases and to ensure proven programs, such as our Smart Moves Diabetes Prevention Program and the Hastings Family YMCA’s Blood Pressure Self-Monitoring Program are available for people wanting to make lifestyle changes to prevent these diseases.”

Bever said South Heartland is also addressing obesity by improving access to and promoting healthy foods and beverages in grocery stores, food pantries and vending machines. “We are also encouraging worksites to adopt wellness policies that support employees to be physically active at work,” she said, “and helping communities design and promote walking routes or bike paths to make it easier for residents to be physically active.”

Because the report indicates plenty of room for improvement in the four counties, the health director said she is glad that there is a strong local system of partners and policymakers already committed to work on many of these health issues. “Our hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies are important collaborators, as are the many community organizations we work with in all four counties” she said.

“Residents can also help by encouraging their local and state decision-makers to ‘make health a priority’ by adopting policies that will support prevention and public health programs that are proven to improve our health and reduce health care costs,” Dr. Bever said. “Together, we can help build safer, healthier communities.”

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