



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

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**South Heartland Challenge to Counties: Take Action to be Healthy**

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) 79 (least healthy, with 14 counties not ranked), demonstrated that the South Heartland counties each had strengths as well as challenges.

"There is a ranking for health outcomes, which considers length of life and quality of life, and a ranking for health factors, which considers behaviors, access to and quality of health care, various social and economic factors, and the physical environment," Bever said.

"Areas of strength common to all four South Heartland counties are a high graduation rate and low unemployment rate." Bever said. "In addition, Adams County ranked 15<sup>th</sup> in the state for clinical care quality and access, which considers the number of primary care physicians, dentists and mental health providers, as well as rates of breast cancer screening and flu vaccinations," she said.

Bever said that Clay County ranked 20<sup>th</sup> in the state for length of life (a health outcome) and had lower rates of children in poverty (a health factor) than the rest of the South Heartland counties.

"In our two south counties, Nuckolls County ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the state for quality of life, 20<sup>th</sup> for physical environment, and the residents have strong social connections," Bever said "and Webster County was 28<sup>th</sup> for physical environment factors, such as levels of air pollution and particulate matter, 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, which are prioritized in the Community Health Improvement Plan. “Our hospitals, clinics, and non-profits like the United Way 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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