

Obesity, health care access top list of health concerns in Calhoun County

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Britni Conley of Battle Creek runs on a treadmill at the YMCA Wednesday afternoon in preparation for some upcoming 5k races. / John Grap/The Enquirer

The top 10

The complete health needs assessment will be available at calhouncountymi.gov/government/health_department. Here's the complete list, ranked in order of importance:

1. Obesity
2. Access to care
3. Chronic diseases
4. Mental health
5. Teen pregnancy
6. Maternal and infant health and mortality
7. Addiction (includes alcohol, tobacco, legal and illegal drugs)
8. Cancer
9. Oral health
10. Sexually transmitted infections

Calhoun County's top health priorities.

It's official: obesity, nutrition and fitness are

That's according to a new report from a group of area health care providers and others who joined together to meet a goal required by the federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.

Under the health care law passed in 2010, hospitals must conduct a community health needs assessment every three years.

Bronson Battle Creek, Southwest Regional Rehabilitation Center and Marshall's Oaklawn Hospital merged efforts and produced a single report, which is required to include a ranked list of health care concerns in the hospitals' service area.

The three hospitals came together because they consider Calhoun County to be their shared, primary service area.

The group released the assessment today.

"We wanted to make sure that this document isn't just something that we did as an exercise in adhering to a mandate," Health Officer Jim Rutherford of the Calhoun County Public Health Department said. "That's why I was so excited about partnering with the hospitals. It's a great opportunity to get all three to the table to really sit down and talk about what is it in the community that exists, what do we need in health issues."

It wasn't just those three institutions, though. The Battle Creek Community Foundation, the Regional Health Alliance and the United Way of the Battle Creek and Kalamazoo Region were part of the initial group of funding organizations.

Rutherford said complying with the law, after all the work was completed, cost about \$80,000. He said about 75 percent of that came from the three hospitals.

That work meant forming a larger group of 11 partners in total. Those additions included Community HealthCare Connections, Family Health Center of Battle Creek, Integrated Health Partners, the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi and Summit Pointe.

Lansing-based Public Sector Consultants was hired to carry out the data collection and conduct focus groups, which

were instrumental in generating the list of Calhoun County's top 10 health issues.

BBC Vice President of Community Health Services Mark Crawford said there is little direction from the government in how the list must be compiled.

"Everyone's assumption is that as the federal government gets experience in this three years from now, it'll be a much more proscribed process," he said. "But in the first year, hospitals are left with a lot of choice about how exactly we want to do that work."

Some focus groups were based on locations, such as an Albion group. Others were based on other demographics, such as the teenager group.

Those groups were asked to come up with their own lists. The teen group, for example, said mental health was its members' biggest concern when it comes to health. Teen pregnancy was their second choice.

Then, the work of determining which should be the top 10 was done.

"That's part science, part subjective," Crawford said.

The top three

Here are the three top health concerns in Calhoun County, according to the group's assessment:

1. Obesity/overweight: According to the group, more than 75 percent of Calhoun County adults are overweight or obese. Middle school and high school-age kids are overweight at twice the state average.

"We want to look at this as an overall picture that includes exercise, proper nutrition, and mental health is probably a portion of that," Oaklawn Hospital's Mike Beck said.

Rutherford said one of the reasons obesity sits on top of the list is because it's about a personal choice, and changing it will affect other areas of people's lives.

"If you don't get a handle on that as a community, if we don't quit smoking, if we don't eat better, if we don't provide access to care, then none of the other issues are going to be addressed," he said.

2. Access to care: 15 percent of adults in the county have no health care coverage, and more black people have limited access to care than white people.

"Access is bigger than just the health care coverage," Beck said. "We're looking at access from the standpoint of: Are the facilities in your community open? Are the hours precluding you from getting there?"

3. Chronic disease, including diabetes, heart disease and hypertension: "Focus groups did pick up on diabetes as something to work on," Beck said, "but we did choose to lump chronic diseases together, and focus on some early diagnosis and effective management of diseases to maintain the community health."

The next step

The report will be posted online and physical copies will be made available, Crawford said.

While the needs assessment could be done as a joint effort, the implementation of plans and solutions can be addressed individually by the hospitals. Crawford said Southwest Rehabilitation, for example, likely wouldn't start designing programs around preventing teen pregnancy.

Rutherford said the Family Health Center's construction of a women's health facility, expected to be completed in 2014, is an example of an organization responding to a need.

Still, the report isn't intended to force agencies to start creating new programs. Rutherford said the big job now is to redirect the area's various task forces and discussion groups into reorienting their goals around this list as much as possible while building on the successes of previous programs.

That job could also include copying things that worked in another place.

"In fact," Crawford said, "we're better off if we can find some successful initiatives that have occurred elsewhere."

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