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Our nation is facing some extremely troubling public health concerns. Approximately 80 percent of our health care dollars are spent on treating health problems associated with preventable diseases. Another alarming trend is that this generation of children may be the first one in the history of our country to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents. Changing these negative health patterns really begins at the local level and will require the leadership of county officials in many ways. The County Health Rankings can help county leaders assess where they are in terms of factors that affect health and determine steps they can take to improve the health of residents in their communities.

County policymakers serve critical roles in ensuring the day-to-day health and well-being of their county residents, developing policies that directly impact individuals’ ability to live healthy lives. For example, ensuring local transportation plans include bike trails and walking paths improves opportunities for community members to be physically active. And county leaders can promote healthy eating by supporting farmers’ markets and community gardens in neighborhoods with limited access to healthy and affordable foods. These decisions and many others that county officials make every day can have tremendous positive community health effects.

County officials are also uniquely positioned to lead and coordinate local collaborative health initiatives and to educate community members about healthy living. This is because they have the capacity to bring together not only county staff from a range of different departments, but also other local stakeholders, business leaders, and community members. It is this type of community-wide collaboration that is necessary to build and sustain effective local health promotion efforts.

Over the past year during my tenure as NACo’s President promoting my Healthy Counties presidential initiative to encourage healthy lifestyle choices, I’ve appreciated having the opportunity to connect with county leaders from both urban and rural communities on health issues. I’ve had the chance to hear about many grassroots efforts in counties across the country to support healthy living through innovative education programs and forward-thinking policy decisions. In my own region we have coordinated the Live Healthy Appalachia initiative to improve the health and well-being of local residents through a multi-faceted approach involving a wide range of innovative community health education programs.

April is National County Government Month, and in coordination with NACo this year’s theme is “Healthy Counties, Healthy Families,” which complements the core message of the County Health Rankings. Counties can take this opportunity to highlight local wellness initiatives and other policies and programs they have implemented to help make it easier for residents in their communities to make healthy lifestyle choices. Counties can also learn about ways to enhance their health promotion efforts through NACo’s Healthy Counties Initiative, an effort to support and promote best practices within the many areas of health that counties are involved with through innovative public-private partnerships.

County officials truly have the ability to drive population-based improvements in health, and the County Health Rankings can provide county leaders with important information to enhance their ongoing efforts to create healthier places for residents to live, work and play. I encourage you to visit www.countyhealthrankings.org and www.naco.org/healthycountiesinitiative to see where you can begin in your county to improve the health of your community.