March 2013 Issue

Welcome to NACo’s first issue of Creating Healthy Counties!

Numerous factors impact health—issues such as access to care, diet and exercise, environmental influences and social and economic factors—that county officials seeking to implement initiatives to promote health may be unsure of where to begin.

Through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and in partnership with RWJF and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute (UWPHI), NACo will be providing counties with information and insight into how they can develop effective local programs and policies that can improve overall community health.

The project will serve as a hub of information and resources for counties about community health improvement and is designed to facilitate peer-to-peer learning among counties about ways to create healthier communities. Counties will have the opportunity to learn how they can utilize information from the annual County Health Rankings to help them address local health needs and work to improve health outcomes.

For more information, visit www.naco.org/improvingcountyhealth

For more information about the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps project, visit www.countyhealthrankings.org

For more information about the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, visit http://www.rwjf.org/

For more information about the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, visit http://uwphi.pophealth.wisc.edu/

Partner Profile

In this first edition of Creating Healthy Counties, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin’s Population Health Institute provide background information on the County Health Rankings and highlight some of the key ways that counties can use the Rankings information to inform community health improvement efforts.
What are the County Health Rankings?
The County Health Rankings assess the health of counties across the nation and are produced jointly by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin’s Population Health Institute. The Rankings, which are updated annually, measure the overall health of counties within each state by examining the multiple factors that affect health, such as education, jobs, income and environment. They are designed to provide a snapshot of a community’s health and demonstrate that health is influenced by many more factors than just what occurs inside a doctor’s office.

What are the specific components of the County Health Rankings?
The Rankings are based on two summary ranks for counties within a state: health outcomes—which define the current health of the county by the quality and length of life of residents—and health factors—which include health behaviors, clinical care, and social, economic and environmental factors. Included among a variety of factors available are alcohol and tobacco use, access to care, education, income, and county environmental quality. On March 20th, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute released the 2013 Rankings that included new factors, including access to dental care and drinking water safety. Read more

How can my county use the County Health Rankings?
The County Health Rankings can provide your county with a clearer picture of the many factors that influence the health of your residents and help identify your community’s primary health problems. The Rankings can help determine the steps needed to improve the health of residents and can assist your county in developing new or enhancing existing community health improvement efforts and plans. Many counties have used the Rankings to generate greater community awareness about local health concerns and help guide decisions about what the community can collectively do to address these issues.

Should counties primarily work on the areas where their rankings are lowest?
Not necessarily—because the Rankings are based on broad measures and include multiple years of data, communities should examine additional information and potentially using a formal community health assessment process prior to making a decision about next steps. County health improvement efforts can be better informed through a more thorough analysis of local data as well as input from community members on key issues of concern.
How can counties keep the focus of community health improvement efforts on the broader "health system" and not just involve the local health department?

Because the Rankings are based on a model of population health that includes a wide range of local-level factors that affect health, the Rankings offer a compelling case to demonstrate that leaders can't improve health in communities by simply looking at more health care or more services delivered by governmental public health. The Rankings highlight that broad-based community-wide collaboration is necessary to build and sustain effective local health promotion efforts.

What role can county officials play in community health improvement efforts?

The decisions that county officials make every day—such as ensuring local transportation plans include bike trails and walking paths to improving opportunities for community members to be physically active or supporting farmers’ markets and community gardens—can have tremendous positive community health effects. County officials are uniquely positioned to lead and coordinate local collaborative health initiatives 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.

Implementation Insight: Model Initiative

Live Healthy Appalachia

Focusing on community education and mobilization, Live Healthy Appalachia is a grassroots effort based in Athens County, Ohio that aims to empower individuals to make healthier lifestyle choices.

In 2010, a small group of community leaders in southeastern Ohio—which has some of the highest rates of chronic diseases in the country—met to discuss ways that community partners could collaborate to address regional health concerns. At that time, Athens County, Ohio was ranked 45 out of 88 counties in health outcomes and 29 percent of adults in the county were obese.

As a result of these initial conversations, the initiative was launched and now involves a diverse group of community partners, such as universities, hospitals, health plans, schools, foundations and local businesses. In the first fiscal year of the initiative, through sponsor support Live Healthy Appalachia developed into an institutionalized organization with a budget of over $100,000.

NACo’s 2011-2012 President Lenny Eliason, a commissioner in Athens County, Ohio, is a key leader and spokesperson for the Live Healthy Appalachia initiative. Commenting on the growth and accomplishments of Live Healthy Appalachia, Eliason said, “The initiative has done a remarkable job of increasing awareness within the community about ways to improve health through a wide range of innovative health education programs.”

Some examples of these programs include the Food is Elementary Program, which uses an evidence-based curriculum to teach good nutrition practices and healthy cooking skills to students in the region. The program is implemented by
individuals who received food educator training from the Food Studies Institute, a nonprofit organization focused on improving child health through nutrition education.

Another very successful program of the initiative is the Coronary Health Improvement Project (CHIP), which is a lifestyle enrichment program designed to help individuals adopt better health habits to reduce disease risk factors. Participants of the CHIP class series have commented that because of their involvement in the program they feel empowered to implement simple lifestyle changes to improve their health. Additionally, after six weeks many individuals lost weight and saw reductions in their cholesterol and blood pressure levels.

In addition to these programs, Live Healthy Appalachia also has initiatives focusing on promoting gardening and raising awareness about food security issues, educating community members about healthy eating by coordinating cooking demonstrations and local grocery store tours led by volunteers from the Ohio University College of Health Sciences and Professions, as well as designing a training program for individuals participating in their first 5K run.

Live Healthy Appalachia has also coordinated two-day health summits that have brought together hundreds of health care professionals, employers, social service representatives, faith leaders and other community stakeholders to discuss ways to reverse the high rates of obesity and chronic disease in the region. Commissioner Eliason said that, “Live Healthy Appalachia invests in community wellness, and we finally have the front page of papers talking about this.”

The leadership team of Live Healthy Appalachia continues to build on these successes and aims to expand the initiative’s community health improvement efforts in a number of ways in the coming years.

For more information about the initiative, visit www.livehealthyappalachia.org.

Resource Spotlight: Roadmaps to Health Action Center
Deciphering data to identify key local health issues and then using it to develop meaningful policy action can seem to be a daunting task at first. The Roadmaps to Health Action Center was developed by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute to overcome this challenge and can help your county begin the process of determining how to use the Rankings information as a catalyst for community health improvement.

The Action Center offers specific information and tools that your county can use to mobilize community action and actively begin to implement initiatives to address local
health issues identified through the Rankings. Divided into detailed action steps and designed to be used by government officials, public health professionals, businesses and other community members, this user-friendly tool can help guide counties step-by-step through the process of improving community health.

The Roadmaps to Health Action Center also features detailed information about the Rankings data as well as a wide range of communication tools that communities can use to help convey the key messages behind the Rankings, such as how local environments directly influence health and that all community members have a stake in creating a healthier community.

Learn more about the Action Center and check out, What Works for Health, to review evidence-based policies and programs that support a variety of factors that affect health.

National News

Santa Cruz County, California Wins RWJF’s Roadmaps to Health Prize
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) recently awarded Santa Cruz County, California with RWJF’s Roadmaps to Health Prize for their efforts to implement innovative community health improvement initiatives. Examples of some of the county’s initiatives include increasing children’s access to health care, providing education, workforce training and substance abuse treatment to justice-involved individuals, and improving options for residents to obtain healthy and affordable food. Only six communities nationwide were selected for the prize and Santa Cruz County was the only county government among the prize winners. Read more

Community Health Improvement in Marion County, Florida
In Florida, the County Health Rankings placed Marion County in the bottom 25 percent of the state’s counties. While not the lowest-ranking county in the state, in response the health department formed a collaborative effort to develop a Community Health Improvement Plan. The process will involve a wide range of representatives from the community, involving sectors such as education, law enforcement and the business community. Read more

Buncombe County, North Carolina: Comprehensive Health Improvement
In an effort to gain a better understanding of health issues in Buncombe County, North Carolina, the county health department conducted a wide-ranging evaluation in coordination with regional partners that involved phone surveys and community listening sessions. The county also produced a Community Health Assessment which highlighted health needs the community should focus on such as access to care and chronic diseases. To build off of the assessment, the county plans to develop an even more comprehensive health improvement plan than those developed previously that includes input from a broad range of stakeholders. Read more
Improving Early Education and Access to Health Data in Dane County, Wisconsin
In partnership with the United Way of Dane County, the county opened an Early Childhood Initiative office to focus on providing young children with skills needed for kindergarten. The creation of the office is part of the county’s Leopold Early Childhood Zone and builds on the county’s existing efforts to improve early childhood education. The Leopold Early Childhood Zone will provide parents with resources and expand home visitations to build developmental skills. Also, through a local collaborative called Healthy Dane, local hospitals and Public Health Madison and Dane County recently launched a website, HealthyDane.org, which provides detailed community health data to help identify local health issues.
Read more

Expanding Access to Care in Prince George’s County, Maryland
In Prince George’s County, Maryland, the county is providing mobile medical and dental services to students through a collaboration with Children’s National Medical Center, Mary’s Center, the University of Maryland School of Nursing Governor’s Wellmobile, the Deamonte Driver Dental Project and Smile Maryland. During the school year these mobile units will travel to close to 175 schools to provide care to students in need of services. Access to dental care, was one of the new health factors released this year.
Read more

Wake County, North Carolina: Community Health Assessment Efforts Seek Resident Input
In Wake County, NC, the county is undertaking efforts to assess community health needs through resident surveys, focus groups and health data gathering. The county plans to complete the assessment in June and many community partners are involved, such as the United Way and local clinics and hospitals. The county’s previous assessment identified obesity rates, lack of health insurance and unemployment as some of the top concerns. In response the county worked to address these issues by increasing the use of food stamps at farmers’ markets, offering job training services and implementing other initiatives.
Read more

Lake County, Illinois Aims to Reduce Youth Substance Abuse
Lake County, IL is working to reduce substance abuse among teens in the county. A local coalition, the Ela Coalition Against Youth Substance Abuse, offers community education programs for youth and parents to prevent youth drug and alcohol use. The Lake County Health Department assists the coalition’s work by gathering data about teen substance use through focus groups at local high schools so that efforts can be targeted to address substances that are most commonly used by teens.
Read more
Updates & Resources

- The PowerPoint presentation and recording from NACo’s March 15 webinar, Understanding and Utilizing the County Health Rankings, are available at www.naco.org/improvingcountyhealth
- On Tuesday, April 2 from 1-2 p.m. Eastern, an informational webinar about RWJF’s Roadmaps to Health Prize will provide details about the Prize, including the application and selection process. RWJF’s Roadmaps to Health Prize honors the health improvement efforts of communities across the country. For more information and to register, please visit: http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/content/rwjf-roadmaps-health-prize-informational-webinar

Share Your Story

NACo would like to hear about your county’s efforts to promote overall resident and community health. Share your county’s story so that it can be included in NACo’s Healthy Counties Database or highlighted in our bi-monthly newsletter. Email Katie Bess at kbess@naco.org.

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