

Policy Brief: Public Health

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DEFINING THE PROBLEM:

According to the Association of Schools of Public Health, "public health is the science of protecting and improving the health of communities."

Specific areas that public health addresses include...

- infectious diseases,
- occupational health and safety,
- epidemiology, and
- health promotion and education.

Each year the United Health Foundation, a private, non-profit foundation dedicated to improving health outcomes and promoting healthier communities, releases "America's Health Rankings." Each state is evaluated on several aspects, including personal behaviors, community environment factors, health policies, and health outcomes. For 2005, Missouri ranked 35th overall out of all 50 states for health status.

Missouri may enhance the health and well-being of its citizens and communities by addressing these critical public health issues.

The public health system in Missouri is a network of various agencies and local organizations. At the state level, public health is overseen by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (MDHSS). There are also 114 public health agencies throughout the state that address public health at the local level, with direct support from MDHSS. Community providers are also a part of the public health system because they create and support initiatives that protect and promote public health.

There are several indicators that are considered when evaluating public health. For Missouri, many of these key indicators paint a troubling picture of the state's public health status.

According to the 2005 America's Health Rankings out of the 50 states (1 being the best), Missouri was ranked ...

- 38th for prevalence in smoking,
- 38th for obesity,
- 35th for occupational fatalities,
- 43rd for cardiovascular deaths, and
- 40th for premature death.

According to Kaiser Family Foundation's State Health Facts out of the 50 states (1 being the best), Missouri was ranked...

- 36th for state expenditures on mental health,
- 40th for Chlamydia and gonorrhea rates,
- 45th for dental visits, and
- 38th for flu vaccinations for older adults.

Public health is a critical issue because it represents the overall health of the community and its citizens. There are significant economic considerations for addressing such public health issues. It was estimated that in 2001, the state of Missouri incurred more than \$182 million in Medicaid costs attributed to smoking. Missouri could save over \$8 million a year in Medicaid expenditures, if they could reduce prevalence of smoking among Missourians by only 25 percent.

Obesity has substantial economic implications as well. In the state of Missouri between 1998 and 2000, Medicare spent \$413 million and Medicaid spent \$454 million for obesity-related healthcare.

As spending on health entitlement programs grows, the rapidly growing cost of health care has become a concern for providers, policymakers, legislators, and consumers. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid estimate total health expenditures for 2006 to reach \$2.16 trillion, and project a rise to over \$4 trillion in 2015. Public health programs have the potential to reduce health care costs in a number of ways, including prevention of disease (as through vaccinations) or early detection.

An example of the benefits of early detection was demonstrated by a study of Wisconsin's Medicare population which found that diabetic screening could save an average of \$619 per diabetic detected over the span of his or her lifetime. For Missouri, these savings could be significant considering that 7.7 percent of Missourians have been diagnosed with diabetes, and another 1.3 percent are considered "borderline" diabetic." The earlier this disease is detected, the sooner it can be controlled, therefore reducing secondary complications, such as cardiovascular disease.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Currently there are several promising public health initiatives underway in the state. The Randolph County Health Department has created the Community Policy and Environmental Change Program to help individuals to improve their health habits even when such change is discouraged by their surrounding environment and society. The agency recognized that individuals can't be expected to take a thirty minute walk if the only place they have to walk is a dangerous two-lane highway. The program is building a walking trail in the city of Huntsville. This will empower community members and provide a real opportunity for individuals to increase their healthy behaviors.

The Kansas City Health Department has undertaken a health literacy initiative targeted at children and adolescents. The Department has established a Community Task Force of Health Literacy with representatives from local school districts, the public library, health literacy specialists,

and parents and children. One main project of the task force is to develop a newspaper called the "Healthy Reader" for students in kindergarten through third grade. The paper will be distributed to local schools and focus on literacy and health concepts, such as mental health and safety and first aid.

Other states and communities have developed successful public health initiatives that Missouri might consider adopting. Some of these proven initiatives are detailed on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Best Practice Initiative website.

The University of Kansas Medical Center has developed a program called TeleKidcare® in conjunction with the Kansas City, KS school district USD 500. TeleKidcare® consists of a network of telehealth monitors in each school health office as well as the KU Pediatric Clinic. When a child feels sick and visits the school nurse, the nurse now has the option of consulting a physician on the spot who can evaluate the child using the telehealth technology.

The TeleKidcare® program has conducted nearly 1,900 interactive consultations and parental surveys demonstrate that 98 percent of parents reporting are either "satisfied" or "very satisfied with the service. Implementing a similar program in Missouri is a real possibility, primarily because the state currently has a proven telehealth system in place. The Missouri Telehealth Network (MTN) has over 82 sites in the state with plans for an additional 14. By "virtually" connecting schools with providers, students can receive health care sooner and potentially reduce the number of days of school missed.

CONCLUSION

Since 1900, the average life expectancy has increased by about 30 years. More than twenty-five of those thirty years can be attributed to advances in public health. The significance of public health is unquestionable. For the state, public health initiatives have the potential to slow rising health care costs that have strained the state budget.

It is estimated that in one year, preventing Missouri's 10,760 smoking-related deaths would collectively add 130,000 total years of productive living. Similarly, preventing the obesity-related deaths would save 100,000

Preventing premature deaths due to smoking, obesity, heart disease, and cancer would save over 55,000 Missouri lives each year.

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years and preventing cholesterol and hypertension-related deaths would save a combined 182,000 years. Just for these specific disease-related deaths, there are over 400,000 years lost annually - years that public health initiatives could potentially save. Public health programs can positively affect all of Missouri's communities, and work to ensure that every Missourian lives a longer, healthier life.

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CENTER FOR HEALTH POLICY

University of Missouri - School of Medicine

827 Clark Hall

Columbia, MO 65211

(573) 882-1491 - fax 573-882-6158

