

(West Bend Daily News --- March 26, 2013)

County still a healthy place to live

Washington is in the top 10 of 72 counties

By DAVE RANK

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Washington County continues to slide down the rankings but remains among the top 10 healthiest in Wisconsin, according to the 2013 County Health Rankings report released by a coalition of public health services last week.

This year, county residents are ranked 10th overall among the state's 72 counties, according to the survey conducted by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, Madison, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Princeton, N.J.

"The health outcome rankings represent today's health and the health factor rankings represent tomorrow's health," said Linda Walter, director of the county's Health Department.

In 2012, Washington County was sixth, one notch lower than its finish in the first two years of the annual reports — 2011 and 2010.

Walter did not consider being 10th on the list this year was a major change for the county.

"I really don't think it has a huge significance," she said. "We've always stated we wanted to stay in the top quartile."

She pointed out that Washington County scored well in the top two categories in the study, 10th in healthy outcomes and fifth in health factors, a one spot improvement from the 2012 health factors ranking.

The compilers of the County Health Rankings also caution one year's rankings should not be compared with prior years because category definitions often change.

Wisconsin's five healthiest counties for 2013, in order, are Ozaukee, Kewaunee, St. Croix, Pierce and Door.

"Where you live does matter to your health, and improving health is everyone's business," Walter said.

This year, Washington County ranks in the top quartile for health outcomes, 10th, and health factors, fifth. Washington County ranks in the top half of Wisconsin counties for physical environment, 23rd, and in the top quartile for health behaviors, 13th, clinical care, ninth, and social and economic factors, sixth.

Walter was particularly pleased with the 23rd ranking for physical environment. Last year, Washington County was ranked in the 40s, she said. "That's probably a more accurate representation of where we stand than in past years."

Healthy: Categories measure state's health

Walter said fighting obesity remains a top priority for the county's health officials, although reducing smoking and alcohol consumption also are high concerns.

"We need to work on them all," she said.

The County Health Rankings examine the health and well-being of people living in nearly every county in every state across the nation and show that how long and well people live depends on multiple factors beyond just access to medical care, said Dr. Patrick Remington, professor and associate dean at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

"I just think this is a wonderful tool," Walter said. "I hope the public is aware of it and uses it."

According to the report, the five counties in the poorest health are Menominee, Milwaukee, Marquette, Adams, and Forest.

The least healthy counties are primarily located in rural areas of central and northern Wisconsin with the exception of Milwaukee

County, the state's most urban county, in the southeast.

"The rankings tell us that we all have a stake in creating a healthier community and no single sector alone can tackle the health challenges in any given community," Remington said. "Collaboration is critical. The rankings are sparking action throughout Wisconsin as people from all sectors join forces to create new possibilities in health— county by county."

The rankings include a snapshot of each county in Wisconsin. UWPHI researchers used measures to assess the level of overall health for each county:

- Premature death;
- Percent of people who report being in fair or poor health;
- Number of days people report being in poor physical and poor mental health;
- Rate of low birthweight infants.

The rankings also examine 25 factors that influence health, including rates of childhood poverty, rates of smoking, obesity levels, teen birth rates, access to physicians and dentists, rates of high school graduation and college attendance, access to healthy foods, levels of physical inactivity, and percentages of children living in single parent households.

This year's rankings include two new measures: access to dentists and drinking water safety.

For more information on the County Health Rankings, go to the website [www. countyhealthrankings.org](http://www.countyhealthrankings.org).

The Washington County Health Department website is [www.co.washington.wi. us/chn](http://www.co.washington.wi.us/chn).

Putting stats to good use

Local organizations do use the results from the annual County Health Rankings in an effort to encourage healthier lifestyles in Washington County.

“The Healthy People Project of Washington County is a great example of the community taking action to improve the overall health of Washington County residents,” said Linda Walter, director of the county’s Health Department.

Formed in 2006, the Healthy People Project of Washington County has grown to include the county’s Health and Planning and Parks departments, hospitals, medical professionals, the Kettle Moraine YMCA, community recreation departments, school districts and area businesses.

“HPP has partnered with the Washington County Breastfeeding Coalition, the Injury Prevention Coalition of Washington County, health care providers, businesses, childcare centers, school districts, and park and recreation departments throughout the county to promote staying active and eating better,” Walter said, with the goal of improving the forecast for tomorrow’s health.”

“The County Health Rankings can be put to use right away by leaders in government, businesses, health care, and every citizen, motivated to work together to create a culture of health in their community,” said Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, president and chief executive officer of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Princeton, N.J.

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