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CONTACT:
Nicole Carkner, QCHI, 563-421-2815

Health partners release 2021 Community Health Assessment

While the coronavirus pandemic has captured most of the healthcare attention over the last 19 months, a new comprehensive Quad Cities health report shows significant gaps remain in issues made worse by social conditions, including poverty and income inequality.

The 2021 Community Health Assessment is a data-driven approach to determining the health status, behaviors and needs of residents in the Quad Cities area. The study was sponsored by Community Health Care, Inc., Genesis Health System, Muscatine County Public Health, Quad City Health Initiative, Rock Island County Health Department, Scott County Health Department and UnityPoint Health-Trinity.

The study is a follow-up to similar studies conducted since 2002 and builds upon a long history of collaboration. The report's data sources include telephone and internet surveys, area focus groups, and secondary data.

The partners invite comments on the final draft of the assessment report via an online survey that will be available from Oct. 26-Nov. 5. The assessment and public comment survey are posted at quadcities.healthforecast.net.

"Local healthcare and public health partners use this assessment to set priorities and programs for the next three years and work collaboratively to improve the overall health of Quad Citians," said Nicole Carkner, executive director of the Quad City Health Initiative. "The partners encourage community engagement in the assessment process and in the work to follow."

The assessment identified 13 "areas of opportunity" for health partners and the larger community (listed in alphabetical order):

- access to healthcare services
- cancer
- diabetes
- heart disease and stroke
- housing
- infant health and family planning
- injury and violence
- kidney disease
- mental health
- nutrition, physical activity and weight
- oral health
- respiratory disease
- substance abuse

"Every one of these health concerns is made worse by economic disparities and inequalities where people are born, live, work, play, worship and age," said Brooke Barnes, deputy director of the Scott County Health Department.

For example, people who don't have access to healthy foods are less likely to eat a balanced diet and are more likely to be at risk for heart disease, diabetes and obesity.

“These issues dramatically influence both personal and community health. To improve the community’s mental and physical health, we need to continue to work collaboratively across sectors to address these root causes of poor health in our community,” Barnes said.

The 2021 list is much the same as the 2018 report, with the exception of respiratory disease replacing tobacco use. Stakeholders throughout the community will narrow this list to the top three concentrations during a strategy session in November. From there, the health partners will update community health improvement plans. The priorities from the 2018 process were nutrition, physical activity and weight; access to healthcare; and mental health.

The number of people who identified their health as “fair” or “poor” in the study’s Total Area increased from 19.3% in 2018 to 24.8% this year. This number is well above both national and Iowa and Illinois percentages and was reported most often among adults ages 40-64, Black respondents, and adults in very low-income households. The local data compares to 12.6% in the United States, 17.7% in Illinois and 14.4% in Iowa.

The pandemic has impacted every aspect of life since March 2020, but focus group members were able to identify other pressing issues in the community. Some of these include a need for more medical specialists in the community; help with navigating complex healthcare systems and medical insurance; more preventative and holistic care options; and improved diversity and cultural competency among medical providers.

The report shows a greater proportion of Quad Citians are overweight or obese than the national average. Overweight is considered having a body mass index, or BMI, at or above 25. The Total Area average is 74.6%, compared to 61% nationally. In the obese category (BMI of 30 or higher), the Total Area is 41.1%, while the national rate is 31.3%.

The report highlighted improvements over time such as fewer Quad-Citians smoke, more have health insurance coverage and more older adults have had flu vaccinations in the past year. The Quad Cities also fares better than the national average on selected indicators, including the percentage of adults who have visited a dentist in the past year, have been screened for diabetes, and have died in motor vehicle crashes.

The 2021 Community Health Assessment included a community survey of 1,150 individuals in Scott, Rock Island and Muscatine counties, extensive secondary data analysis and the gathering of input from local community members in 26 focus groups held across the counties. The qualitative data were collected by the study sponsors in partnership with Community Stakeholder Committee members and other community partners. Because of the pandemic, focus groups were conducted either virtually or with COVID-19 precautions while in person.

“The 2021 Community Health Assessment is a resource for the entire community,” said Daniel Joiner, diversity and community impact officer, UnityPoint Health-Trinity. “This report is the foundation of how the community can improve its overall health. We hope the data will be helpful to local organizations in their own planning, and we look forward to exploring new collaborative ideas for projects and policies that will advance our Quad-Cities region.”

"Our collaborative assessment process recognizes the critical role of all community sectors in creating a healthy community," Tom Bowman, CEO of Community Health Care, said.

“All of the partners looked carefully at the needs shown from the 2018 assessment and tailored programs to improve health in these three focus areas, among others,” said Michelle Dane, executive director, marketing, communications and business development for Genesis Health System. “We expect to delve into this assessment and determine how to improve our community’s health.”

From the 2018 report, regional health partners created programs and initiatives from the priority areas of nutrition, physical activity and weight; access to healthcare; and mental health. Highlights of these include implementing behavioral telehealth services; developing with community partners the Quad Cities Behavioral Health Coalition; creating a resource guide for local programs for nutrition and physical activity; establishing a helpline to find a medical provider; and opening a collaborative health care facility.

Public health’s mission across the country and locally is to “preserve, promote and protect health,” said Nita Ludwig, administrator of the Rock Island County Health Department. “We only can achieve our mission by working with diverse cross sector partners, including nonprofits, social service agencies, government leaders, educators, law enforcement personnel and faith leaders.”

Both in 2018 and 2021, data from Muscatine County was included in the total regional report. “We welcomed this opportunity to join the collaborative community health assessment process and connect our regional efforts,” said Christy Roby Williams, director of Muscatine County Public Health, UnityPoint Health-Trinity Muscatine.

With funding provided by Genesis Health System and UnityPoint Health-Trinity, the partners hired PRC of Omaha, Nebraska, to conduct a survey, analyze data and provide a comprehensive report. The integrated process leveraged best practices in assessment methodology and the study was designed to provide comparative data at the state and national levels.

Questions about the 2021 Community Health Assessment can be directed to the Quad City Health Initiative, which will be working with the study sponsors to improve health status and quality of life through ongoing projects and community assessments. Please visit qchealthinitiative.org for more information.

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