

Health: Location is everything

County report shows wide variation in rankings

By ED SCOTT STAFF WRITER

Charlotte County placed 19th, Sarasota County fourth and DeSoto County 38th statewide in county health rankings released Wednesday, developed by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute to illustrate how counties compare on certain health issues in each state. "If you're 19th out of 67, that's pretty respectable," Charlotte County Commissioner Robert Skidmore said. "It proves our citizens enjoy a healthy life in essentially what is paradise. "For next year, we are just going to have to do better and improve, and get closer to No. 1." Collier County ranked first overall among Florida's 67 counties. The nationwide ranking project was funded through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

County health rankings are based on two health outcomes — mortality (number of deaths) and morbidity (the ways in which a person is unhealthy). Health outcomes are influenced by health behaviors (tobacco use, diet and exercise, alcohol use, unsafe sex), clinical care (access to care and quality of care), social and economic factors (education, employment, income, family and social support, and community safety) and the physical environment (environmental quality and the built environment). Charlotte County's rankings ranged from 12th (physical environment) to 29th (clinical care). Sarasota County's rankings ranged from second (morbidity) to 56th (physical environment). DeSoto's rankings ranged from 11th (physical environment) to 65th (clinical care). More rankings can be found at www.countyhealthrankings.org. County health department officials also point to data at the Community Health Assessment Resource Tool Set (CHARTS) Web site, www.floridacharts.com, for quantitative data regarding health care in the three counties.

Marne Cothran, public information specialist for the **Charlotte County Health Department**, says the report "is important because it identifies the factors that impact the ability of our residents to maintain healthy lifestyles. With this knowledge, we look forward to working with community partners for a healthier and safer community. "We're continually exploring new options to respond to the community's public health needs."

'I feel good' Carl Lamparter, 81, an Ohio native who has been a full-time resident of North Port since 1997, started working on losing weight after a doctor diagnosed his type 2 diabetes (high bloodsugar level) in 2001, when he weighed 235 pounds. He got his weight down to 220 pounds at Peace River North Port Health Park, which has a wellness program that is closing in March. For the past two years, he has worked out at the North Port YMCA three days a week, on the treadmill, stationary bicycle and various exercise machines. Combining a healthy diet and exercise — including taking care of his Sabal Trace yard — he's now down to 191 pounds. His goal is 185, his weight when he went into the military in 1950. "I feel good," Lamparter said. The retired salesman added that he drinks only about one beer a month and has never smoked. He says there are many outlets for staying healthy in Sarasota County. "You can play ball. You can play golf," he said. Staying healthy will help Lamparter stay out of the hospital. He would have to travel to Venice, Englewood or Charlotte County for admission, since North Port, Sarasota County's most populated city, does not have a hospital.

Sarasota County Health Department environmental administrator Chuck Henry said in a conference call Wednesday that data regarding North Port's prospect for a hospital is being studied by the Community Health Improvement Partnership, the North Port Community Health Action Team, county officials and various hospital organizations. "The whole process of looking at validating service zones and where hospitals can be supported is an issue that is looked at very closely in Sarasota County, and I know that North Port is one area that is being looked at," he said.

Sarasota Memorial Hospital spokeswoman Kim Savage added that "part of bringing a hospital to North Port involves recruiting more primary-care doctors and specialists who will utilize that hospital. The North Port ER and outpatient center that we've recently opened there is the first step. Hopefully, as we recruit more doctors, it will make the possibility of a hospital more likely."

'Good insight' Adam DuBois, spokesman for the DeSoto County Health Department, says the Wisconsin report is useful in helping officials "prioritize their efforts to improve the health of residents of DeSoto County.

"It was good insight to know where we ranked with the other counties. But it didn't tell us where we may be missing the target," DuBois said. "We work with our community partners to try to identify these public health issues and improve them on a daily basis. Our programs look to the quality of life for the residents of DeSoto County." DuBois cited the county's efforts to educate Spanish speaking residents about diabetes.

Health behaviors According to Florida CHARTS, residents of the three counties exhibit a wide range of health behaviors. On a scale of 1-4, with lower numbers being more favorable toward good health, Charlotte residents score 2 on physical activity, 2.33 on overweight and obesity (adults), 2 on heavy or binge drinking and 3 on tobacco use by adults.

DeSoto County residents score 3 on physical activity, 3.67 on overweight and obesity (adults), 4 on heavy or binge drinking and 2 on tobacco use by adults. Sarasota County residents score 1.67 on physical activity, 2 on overweight and obesity (adults), 1 on heavy or binge drinking and 3 on tobacco use by adults.

All three county health departments have worked in recent years to increase public awareness about the H1N1 virus while also responding to local issues, such as beach advisories (Charlotte), anti-smoking campaigns (Sarasota) and walkability (DeSoto).

DuBois says if people took a few extra minutes to walk short distances, rather than drive, "it would improve the health of the community. Making sidewalks safer will encourage people to walk."

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