

Study finds Nelson 25th healthiest county in state

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By Stephanie Hornback

Nelson County moved up four slots this year to be the 25th healthiest of Kentucky's 120 counties in the second annual health study conducted by the Mobilizing Action Toward Community Health project, a collaboration between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.

The study takes into consideration factors that, if improved, could make communities healthier places to live, learn, work and play, according to the study's website, www.countyhealthrankings.org.

Wendy Keown, RN, BSN, director of outreach for the Lincoln Trail District Health Department, said the department takes the study seriously.

"We do a lot with these results," she said. "First of all, it really helps us plan what kind of education we need to do in these counties."

The results could also help the district receive grants, Keown said.

The statistics that contribute to the rankings show counties what they're doing well and what they could improve, Keown said. LTDHD plans to convene a work group to study the results and develop ideas on how to address some of the lower-scoring areas, she said, adding that the department will also collaborate with the entire community, including hospitals, physicians, mental health services and other community resources, to tackle issues.

For example, the percentage of adults in Nelson County who smoke is 29 percent, compared to 28 percent in Kentucky and 15 percent nationally. Twenty-eight percent of adult Nelson Countians are obese, compared to 31 percent in Kentucky and 25 percent nationally.

Reversing these trends comes down to information, said Nelson County Judge Executive Dean Watts, chairman of the LTDHD board.

"Anytime we can educate our generation plus the next generation on more healthy lifestyles, I think we're going to have a positive impact on the community," he said.

The scores that determine the rankings are developed using the following breakdown:

- 30 percent — Health behaviors, which include tobacco use, diet and exercise, alcohol use and unsafe sex
- 20 percent — Clinical care, which includes access to and quality of care
- 40 percent — Social and economic factors, which include education, employment, income, family and social support, and community safety
- 10 percent — Physical environment, which includes environmental quality and built environment

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute collect data from several sources. For example, for access to healthy foods — an area in which Nelson County improved from 33 percent last year to 43 percent this year — data comes from the U.S. Census Bureau's Zip Code Business Patterns, which determines the number of grocery stores and farmers markets based on their North American Industrial Classification System codes.

For motor vehicle crash deaths per 100,000 population — which is 26 for Nelson County — the data comes from the National Center for Health Statistics, part of the Centers for Disease Control, and is based on the National Vital Statistics System.

Obesity and smoking are Nelson County's main problem areas, according to the study. The county also saw a 21 percent increase in single-parent households, from 10 percent last year to 31 percent this year. Single-parent households are frequently tied to greater poverty levels, and poverty often goes hand-in-hand with poorer health outcomes, according to an LTDHD press release.

Sixteen percent of Nelson County children live in poverty, compared to 27 percent in Breckinridge County, the lowest-ranking county in the eight-county LTDHD region at No. 57. However, Breckinridge County fared better than Nelson County in Chlamydia rate per 100,000 population — 115 compared to Nelson County's 216.

Complete results for all counties in Kentucky can be found at www.countyhealthrankings.org. In the top right corner, enter the county for which you want information — “Nelson, Kentucky,” or “Hardin, Kentucky,” for example.

Rankings for counties in the LTDHD region other than Nelson and Breckinridge were:

- Washington — 7
- Hardin — 14
- Meade — 16
- LaRue — 32
- Marion — 53
- Grayson — 56

Boone County in northern Kentucky got the No. 1 spot, with Owsley County in eastern Kentucky coming in last.