

# State department looking to make Ohio healthier

By **Sara Arthurs** - October 31, 2018

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Staff Writer

Ohio ranks 46th out of 50 states in population health and is getting worse in many areas.

But in northwestern Ohio and around the state, people are working together to address this dismal ranking.

Representatives of the Ohio Department of Health and the Columbus-based Health Policy Institute of Ohio, which are trying to ascertain how to make Ohio healthier, came to Findlay on Tuesday to get information.

About 140 people from 21 northwestern Ohio counties were involved in the session held at the Marathon Center for the Performing Arts, the fourth of five sessions being held statewide.

The goal was to give area health leaders input on the 2019 State Health Assessment and the next State Health Improvement Plan, which will outline how the state hopes to improve Ohioans' health between 2020 and 2022.

Improvement is needed, as the health of Ohio residents is declining in many areas. In 2015, 16.5 percent of Ohioans were in fair or poor health, and the goal was to decrease that to 16.2 percent by 2019. Instead, the 2017 figure is 18.9 percent statewide, and 17.1 percent in the northwestern part of the state.

The number of premature deaths have also increased, in large part due to drug overdoses, said Amy Bush Stevens, vice president for public and prevention policy

at the Health Policy Institute of Ohio. Overdose deaths per 100,000 population rose from 27.7 in 2015 to 44.1 in 2017 statewide. The northwestern Ohio figure for 2017 was 32.4.

Bush Stevens said Ohio got worse, or changed very little, on all health outcomes being tracked. And disparities persisted.

"So clearly we have our work cut out for us," she said.

The Ohio Department of Health hired Health Policy Institute of Ohio, a nonpartisan organization, to facilitate the creation of the improvement plan.

Bush Stevens said the purpose of Tuesday's event was to "get out of Columbus" and get feedback from other regions.

She said institute representatives are learning things they might not see if they look only at statewide data, such as how rural, urban and suburban communities differ.

Rural communities, for example, have more transportation challenges in accessing health care, but often have fewer safety issues, as people feel like they know their neighbors.

In every region across the state, "mental health and addiction is a big concern," as are children's health and trauma, she said.

Dr. Clint Koenig, medical director of the Ohio Department of Health, said much of the discussion around the state has focused on "social determinants of health." That is, issues like education and housing play a role in health.

He said the hope is to put together a document that people inside and outside of health care can use to help improve health across the state.

Britney Ward, director of community health for the Hospital Council of Northwest Ohio, works with urban and rural counties on health assessments. She said she has

seen a shift. In the past, the state might tell local communities what to do, but now state officials are asking local health leaders what needs to happen.

She said rural counties tend to have fewer overall resources, but typically a lot more collaboration.

Hancock Public Health Commissioner Karim Baroudi said Tuesday's event was "our chance to voice our local concerns" to those operating at the state level. And in Ohio, "different communities have different needs," he said.

The state plans to update its plan next year.

Koenig encouraged everyone in attendance to promote the State Health Improvement Plan. To rise above the 46th ranking, it will take effort, Koenig said.

The general public can help by being "an active participant in your community." And, he said, "Take good care of yourself."

Hancock County and Hardin County are both doing their own countywide Community Health Assessments, and are encouraging residents who receive the surveys to return them. A report on Hancock County's survey results is expected next spring.

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## Comments

1

