

Improving health: “Counties are key”

By Dave Rooney, Dakota County Community Services Director

April 2009

At a national health conference last fall I was struck by how much we do as counties that influences health outcomes of our residents. At one level I have known this my entire 34 years in county government. Yet, as a human service administrator, I have gone on my merry way acting as if income maintenance programs are just about poverty, child protection just about safety, mental health services just about mental health, and parks just about recreation. And “health” was solely the business of our local public health, medical clinics and hospitals. I think you see my point...I was stuck in the silos and not connecting the dots and seeing the continuum of health. I did not appreciate the impact of the social determinants of health and the corresponding role and impact of county services.

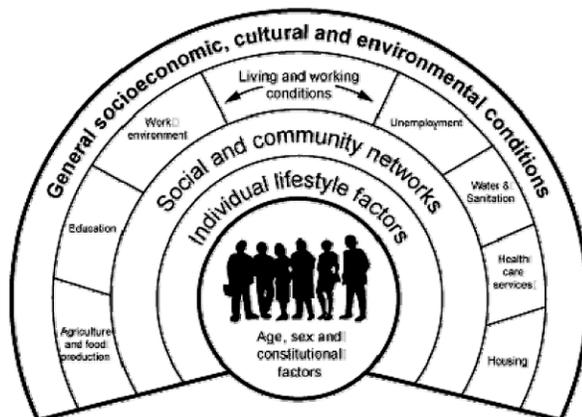
So after all these years, I’ve had an epiphany. I now believe the overarching goal of county services should be TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF ALL OUR RESIDENTS and that ALL COUNTY DEPARTMENTS have a role in improving health. Good health is a critical cornerstone of our quality of life, in having a productive workforce, in keeping down the cost of government services, and in having a strong economy. Reframing how we as counties think about health is a critical first step towards improving the health of Minnesotans and reducing health care costs.

Good health is more than the result of our genes, our lifestyle, and our access to medical care – it is also determined by the day-to-day conditions in which we live and work. The Institute of Medicine¹ recommended that we adopt a broader view of health after finding that “interventions to improve access to medical care and reduce behavioral risk have only limited potential for success if the larger societal and economic context in which people live is not improved.”

The Determinants of Health

What influences our health? Virtually all major diseases are primarily determined by a network of interacting exposures that increase or decrease the risk for the disease. Health is more than simply our body’s ability to ward off disease. Many factors influence our health, including:

- **Age, sex, and biological factors:** Genetic makeup, family history, and physical and mental health problems acquired during life impact health.
- **Individual lifestyle factors:** Attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors affect health.
- **Social and community networks:** The social environment and degree of community support for health-promoting or health-threatening behaviors or conditions affect health.



Socioeconomic, cultural and environmental factors: These “social determinants of health” include:²

- income equality
- employment and job security
- working conditions
- social inclusion/exclusion
- early childhood care
- education
- food security
- housing
- access to healthy food, clean water & air
- access to quality health services
- safe opportunities for recreation

Source: Lothian, Scotland Annual Report, 2004³

¹ The Institute of Medicine. The Future of the Public’s Health in the 21st Century. 2002. www.iom.edu/Object.File/Master/4/165/AssuringFINAL.pdf

² Raphael D, Bryant T, Curry-Stevens A. Toronto charter outlines future health policy directions for Canada and elsewhere. Health Promotion International, Vol. 19, No. 2, 269-273, June 2004.

³ National Health Service Lothian. Accessed at http://www.nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk/news/annual_reports/publichealth/2005/ar2004/contents.html

How do social factors impact health and health care costs?

Social policy is health policy. The average U.S. life expectancy increased 30 years during the 20th century. Researchers attribute much of that increase not to drugs or medical technologies but to social reforms; for example, improved wages and work standards, sanitation, universal schooling, and civil rights laws. Social measures like living wage jobs, paid sick and family leave, guaranteed vacations, universal preschool and access to college, and guaranteed health care can further extend lives.

“The greatest wealth is health.”

- Virgil

Impact on health. Long term studies show that socioeconomic conditions have a cumulative effect on the probability that a person will develop heart disease, stroke, some cancers and adult-onset diabetes. These conditions operate at every level of development, including early childhood, childhood, adolescence and adulthood. These conditions immediately influence health and provide the basis for health or illness during the stages of a person’s life.⁴

“The fact is poverty is the greatest problem in public health. A living wage is essential to a healthful standard of living.”

- American Journal of Public Health, 1918

We all pay the price for poor health. It’s not only the poor but also the middle classes whose health is suffering. We already spend \$2 trillion each year to patch up our bodies, more than twice per person the average of what other industrialized nations spend, and our health care system is strained to the breaking point. Where and how people live, learn, work and play have more impact on their health than medical care. A recent study on return on investment from Trust for America’s Health⁵ shows that a small investment in community prevention programs can produce substantial savings in overall health care costs, with a return of \$5.60 for every \$1 invested. Projected savings include \$5 billion for Medicare; \$1.9 billion for Medicaid; and \$9 billion for private payers.

“We’re all in the business of health”

Minnesota counties already provide a broad array of services that address the social environment that is so critical to health. Counties have a great opportunity to be a key player in improving health outcomes and reducing health care costs by reframing the work we already do in improving social and economic conditions for people. An “upstream” orientation does not diminish the importance of delivering quality, affordable and timely services - rather, this shift in focus has potential to reduce the burden on these critical services.

“Health is a universal human aspiration and a basic human need.”

- WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health

As Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, recently stated, we must reframe how we think about “good health.”⁶

- What would happen if all children ate three healthy meals a day?
- What would happen to health if everyone completed high school and postsecondary education?
- What would happen to health if everyone lived in a safer neighborhood?
- What if all women in poverty and their babies had access to an intensive home visiting program?

Counties are key links in the fabric of the social environment that protects and promotes the health of the residents of our communities. Our challenge is to more clearly see that ultimately, “we are all in the business of health.” By expanding our perspective on “county services” and reframing them as a critical component of our residents’ health, we will not only provide better care but we will also contribute to the important goal of reducing the long-term costs of health care.

⁴ Raphael, D. (ed.) (2004) Social Determinants of Health: Canadian Perspectives. Canadian Scholars Press, Toronto.

⁵ Trust for America’s Health. Blueprint for a Healthier America: Modernizing the Federal Public Health System to Focus on Prevention and Preparedness. 2008. <http://healthyamericans.org/report/55/blueprint-for-healthier-america>.

⁶ Lavizzo-Mourey R. RWJF Commentary Regarding Social Factors’ Influence on Variations in Health and Life Expectancy. <http://www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=34908>

Implications for Minnesota Counties

Along with our current county public health programs, many of the services counties provide should be viewed as promoting health. County staff working in parks, law enforcement, child protection, mental health, employment counseling, health care enrollment, and highway maintenance need to see their work as contributing to better health outcomes for our citizens. The unifying mission of county services is to promote the health of our citizens. We need to educate county staff on the how their work contributes to our citizens' health outcomes. Our staff need to help our citizens understand the link between the service they are receiving and their current and long term health. We should be asking ourselves as we deliver a service, whether to an individual or the community as a whole, how is this going to contribute to better health outcomes and how it will contribute to lower health care costs?

The County Challenge

Counties are in a unique position, not only because we deliver health and health related services, but also because counties can provide leadership to organize communities to work toward local conditions that contribute to better health outcomes. By reframing how we think about health, counties can do more to meet our collective responsibility to help our citizens lead healthier lives. Counties need to challenge our own services and our communities to a common overarching goal: **TO IMPROVE HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR ALL RESIDENTS.**