



State, local health officials seek to improve rural health care

BY STEPHEN J. PYTAK / PUBLISHED: MARCH 28, 2017

SCHUYLKILL HAVEN — More than 100 state and local officials met Monday to discuss ways to provide better health services in the region, and help people battle obesity and drug addiction.

What some learned at the event — Public Health 3.0: Moving Health Forward, a program set up by the state Department of Health and held at Penn State Schuylkill — is that one of the keys to success is knowing what resources are available.

“Concerning education and awareness and prevention, how and what can you do? There is nothing that I’m aware of in the county right now for, like, any kind of education and awareness programs,” Mary Beth Dougherty, staff assistant to state Sen. David G. Argall, R-29, said at the forum, held at the campus Health and Wellness Center.

“Actually, that’s what I do,” said Diane Rowland, prevention services coordinator for Schuylkill County Drug and Alcohol Program, Pottsville.

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David McKeown/Staff Photo Sally Casey, right, with Schuylkill Women in Crisis, speaks during the group breakouts part of the Public Health 3.0: Moving Health Forward public meeting with Kay Jones, executive director of Schuylkill County’s VISION, taking notes at Penn State Schuylkill on Monday, March 27, 2017.



David McKeown/Staff Photo Kay Jones, executive director of Schuylkill County’s VISION, leads the group breakout reports during the Public Health 3.0: Moving Health



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"I work with all the school districts in the county. I provide classroom education anywhere from grades K to 12. But when I'm going in and talking to the kids, I see them one time a year. The real key is to pursue evidence-based prevention programs. A really good example of that is something called Life Skills Training developed by Dr. Gilbert J. Botvin. And it has about 35 years of research behind it," Rowland said.

The website for the state Department of Health contains information about the Pennsylvania State Health Improvement Plan, a multi-year strategic plan that began in 2015.

Its three primary health priorities are obesity, physical inactivity and nutrition, primary care and preventative services, and mental health and substance use, according to the site.

In recent times, the department has been holding meetings across the state in an effort to improve health care by encouraging health care agencies to work together.

Representatives of six counties — Carbon, Columbia, Northumberland, Schuylkill, Snyder and Union — participated in Monday's event. More than 40 of the people who attended were from Schuylkill County, Kay Jones, executive director of Schuylkill County's VISION, said.

Jones was named as the Schuylkill County point of contact for the Public Health 3.0 project. In June, she will provide the state Department of Health with updates on topics discussed at Monday's meeting, according to David Saunders, director of the department's Office of Health Equity, Harrisburg.

And the next Public Health 3.0 meeting for this collection of counties will be held sometime in fall, Saunders said.

Concerns

One of the goals Monday was to determine what the top health concerns were in the region.

On Monday morning, Matthew D. Eckley, executive director of operations for the Eastern Division of The Primary Health Network, Altoona, drove through Fountain Springs in Butler Township on his way to the meeting in Schuylkill Haven.

Forward public meeting at Penn State Schuylkill on Monday, March 27, 2017.

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And he passed by the former Saint Catherine Medical Center.

In 2012, Northern Schuylkill County lost its only hospital after admissions and medical services were halted by the state at Saint Catherine Medical Center due to financial problems that led to lack of supplies and employees not getting paid.

The sight of the vacant facility made him wonder if people in Northern Schuylkill County had access to adequate health care.

"I think geographic isolation is a huge issue. Again, as I drove through here today I could see that's a major, major barrier to get services," Eckley said.

"I grew up in Central Pennsylvania and I love it. But physicians don't necessarily want to come to rural PA. Geisinger has trouble recruiting," Janet Tomcavage, chief population health officer for Geisinger Health System, Danville, said.

"I think bringing them in to organize systems where they have the opportunity to kind of be part of a larger strategy that influences health and outcomes has been Geisinger's M.O. I do think that immigration challenges will hurt us in a big way. I do think that primary care is a problem. And it may not be the area so much as it is we're struggling with some specialities. For example, urology is a big gap in health care. At least it is for us. And sometimes it's medical urology versus surgical urology. There are some gaps overall in health care, not just in Pennsylvania. I think we're just doubly impacted because of where we are," Tomcavage said.

"We have an easier time recruiting physicians who are going to have access to larger cities," Eckley said.

Schuylkill County Commissioner Gary Hess identified a few health concerns in Schuylkill County.

"I know one concern that we have had for many years is not having enough doctors and also care in the area. Most of our citizens have had to leave the area to get good quality care," Hess said.

But he acknowledged that last year, Lehigh Valley Health Network merged with Schuylkill Health, which includes two hospitals in Pottsville. And he recognized two other hospitals with operations in Schuylkill County, St. Luke's Hospital Miners Campus, based in Coaldale, and Geisinger Health System, which has offices in Pottsville.

"I think we've established a good foothold and we have nowhere to go but up. And that's a good sign for all ages of our population," Hess said.

Solutions

Hess praised The Skook Recovers, a grass-roots resource for people battling drug addiction.

Travis "Featherhawk" Snyder, Hegins, a former drug addict, started the group in June 2015. The group also has a website at www.theskookrecovers.com.

"They're helping other people and they're getting into communities and helping clean up playgrounds and so forth to show how they're putting their lives back together. They've been growing constantly since their inception," Hess said.

Sometimes the solutions to health care problems in your community can be found with a little effort, said Tyler R. Zimerofsky, a senior at Nativity BVM High School, Pottsville, who attended Monday's event.

"I work with a lot of organizations. I collaborate with them here in the county. They have been really great to me. And I'm so thankful to be involved. But that was my decision, to get involved. I'm not trying to brag at all, but I had to step forward and say 'hey, I want to get involved,'" Zimerofsky said.

"To improve health services in Schuylkill County, both sides have to extend their hands. For example, students have to step out and say 'hey, I want to do something.' I think a business world and a nonprofit world also need to stand up and say 'Hey, we want you involved. We want to teach you about this. We want to involve you,'" Zimerofsky said.

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