

Appalachian District Shines as North Carolina Rises in National Health Ranking

Written by Peggy Albertson

Tuesday, 13 December 2011 15:00

As North Carolina moves up in the ranking for overall health in the nation, the Appalachian District, consisting of Watauga, Ashe and Alleghany counties, is being highlighted as a leader in the fight against the rapidly rising obesity rates among North Carolinians. The Health Rankings report released this week profiles all 50 states in a variety of health measures. North Carolina is now ranked 32nd in the nation for overall health, up from 35th last year and from 37th in 2008.

One of the leading efforts in fighting obesity has been the Communities Putting Prevention to Work (CPPW) grant in the Appalachian District. The grant is part of a larger grant funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The goal of CPPW is to create environments where the healthy choice is the easy choice, as it is a part of the nation-wide effort to fight the rising tide of obesity.

“While North Carolina is slowly moving the needle on the health of its citizens, right here in the western part of the state big changes have been happening,” said Beth Lovette, Health Director of the Appalachian District Health Department. “We hope we can continue to be a leader in reversing the obesity epidemic.”

So far, CPPW Appalachian District has been a clear leader and an integral part in creating lasting policy change surrounding obesity. Last month, the Appalachian District Board of Health adopted a Complete Streets resolution, as did the town of West Jefferson. This is an important first step in making the cities and towns in Watauga, Ashe and Alleghany Counties more walkable and bike-able, which will increase residents’ ability to be more physically active.

Both resolutions come on the heels of the area Health and Built Environment Summit held by the CPPW Appalachian District this past September. The summit advanced the discussion and implementation of Complete Streets by gathering over 100 policy makers from the tri-county area for a three day workshop.

In addition to the Complete Streets Resolution, CPPW Appalachian District has supported a school gardening program. Students at Mabel Elementary School in Watauga County are participating in “Growing Success,” a school-wide project that involves not only planting and harvesting vegetables in a school garden, but also learning about permaculture, a philosophy about working with nature, and making their own compost.

North Carolina Governor, Bev Perdue was emphatic that more must be done. “While any improvement is encouraging, we still have a long way to go to improve the health of all North Carolinians,” Gov. Bev Perdue said. “Now is not the time to cut critical funding to health care and prevention among the most vulnerable members of our communities.”

“We hope to respond to Governor Perdue’s cry for action by continuing to change policy and the environment in which our citizens live,” said Jennifer Greene, Director of CPPW Appalachian District. “CPPW Appalachian is currently working on creating healthier places for our children, building healthful worksites in our community, creating a local food environment and advancing

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the built environment as far as possible to benefits the citizens of our region.”

North Carolina was also recognized for progress in reducing smoking rates among adults over the past decade; however, the report also points out more than 1.4 million adults still smoke in the state.

The smoke free restaurant and bars legislation, which is expected to save an estimated \$4.7 million per year in avoidable medical care cost for hospitality workers, has also has been a catalyst for local municipalities to enact smoke-free ordinances. In a 2010 state survey, 81 of 100 county governments and more than 200 city/town governments reported they have implemented 100% smoke free or tobacco-free buildings.

Locally, Boone was the one of the first local governments to pass an ordinance that removes smoking from all public places. Boone’s law, enforced by the town police department, went into effect February 2010. “This ordinance will greatly improve the quality of life for our citizens,” said Lovette. “We are proud of our elected officials for taking this bold step to eliminate secondhand smoke in our community.” Lynne Mason, Mayor Pro Tem, states, “Boone is committed to creating healthy smoke free environments for all in our public spaces.”