

## Write to us

# OPINION

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# Let's work on public health

On March 26, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation released its annual County Health Rankings to very little apparent media or public attention. I was curious about this lack of interest. I hope it isn't a reflection of collective hopelessness or complacency. As a community, are we frustrated with our health and unsure how to improve it? Or have we



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accepted these poor rankings and now are simply tired of being reminded?

The foundation's website reveals that of 57 counties measured in California, Fresno is No. 46 in Health Outcome (how healthy a county is) and No. 54 in Health Factors (things that influence a

county's health).

To kick off National Public Health Week on Monday, the state Department of Public Health posted its 2014 Health Status Profile. Our county's numbers were equally sobering.

Certainly these health rankings remind us of the unique combination of challenges we in the Central Valley face in the effort to achieve a healthy lifestyle. The issues of higher poverty, lower educational levels, low medical provider to population ratios, air pollution and concerns about water quality are compounded by the national obesity and diabetes epidemics and persistent national health disparities.

Reflected in these rankings is that public health now describes a broad social enterprise. This fact underscores the need for all of us to work effectively together to create an environment that makes it easier to choose healthier options.

Over the last several years, our Fresno County Department of Public Health sustained budget cuts necessitated by the recession. Still, the department maintained its historic functions of surveillance and control of communicable diseases, oversight of environmental issues, emergency preparedness, oversight of emergency medical services, public health nursing, oversight of children's medical services, and correctional health. In addition, the department initiated work with public and private agencies and community groups in tobacco prevention, nutrition improvement, obesity prevention and sexually transmitted disease prevention.

The Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Program strives to increase consumption of, and access to, healthy foods and beverages, and promotes increased physical activity. The Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community campaign encourages healthier marketing and product access by retailers. The Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative encourages and recognizes hospitals that offer best practices for infant feeding and mother/baby bonding. The STD Community Interventions Program works to promote the awareness and prevention of sexually transmitted disease. These and other collaborative efforts have been in development and will demonstrate positive outcomes in coming years.

We can turn these rankings around. Every action we take as individuals, and collectively as a community, affects public health. As individuals, we must know and make the healthy choice whenever possible. As a community, we must assure that healthy options are universally available.

Each and every day let us strive:

■ As individuals to learn about, and adopt, regular physical activity and healthy eating habits.

■ As families to ensure the safe, loving and supportive environment that fosters personal growth.

■ As employers to adopt and emphasize wellness in the workplace.

■ As retailers to assure our community has ready access to healthy products and services with limited marketing of unhealthy products and services.

■ As medical and mental health providers to offer our patients every preventive intervention available.

■ As educators to assure that each student fully understands the meaning and value of health.

■ As community and spiritual leaders to enhance partnerships to assess the health needs of our community and implement actions proven to be effective.

■ As public officials to assure that every decision and policy reflects a careful consideration of its public health impact.

I urge everyone to visit the Fresno County Department of Public Health website. Together let us take the first steps toward improved collective good health.

► Dr. Ken Bird is the interim health officer for the county of Fresno and is with the Fresno County Department of Public Health.