

State's health improves despite miserly public health budget

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Since 1990, the United Health Foundation's "America's Health Rankings" have tracked the status of our nation's health and the overall health of each US state. These rankings have become established as the nation's annual check-up and provide an opportunity to see how Nevada stacks up on health measures versus other states.

Nevada's overall health ranking among US states is currently 38th, an increase from last year's ranking of 39th. This year's report not only indicates an improved overall ranking for Nevada over the past five years – up from 47th in 2010 – it points to notable areas of improvement.

First the good news. The 2015 rankings highlight Nevada's relatively low infant mortality rate (rank of 13th among US states), low levels of preventable hospitalizations (14th), and comparatively low rates of obesity (16th) and adults who smoke (18th). In the past year alone, smoking decreased from 19.4 to 17.0 percent of adults. Over the past five years, preventable hospitalizations among Medicare beneficiaries have decreased by 20 percent – population health gains that also translate into cost savings for taxpayers.

These strengths, however, are more than offset by significant population health challenges in Nevada, including chronic primary care physician workforce shortages (47th), a high percentage of the population who remain uninsured (48th), high rates of drug deaths (47th) and violent crime (48th), and a low high school graduation rate (48th).

Nevada's high school graduation rate of 70.7 percent is well below the national average 81.4 percent. On average a college graduate's life expectancy is 5 years longer than those who did not complete high school. Worse, for those Nevadans without a high school education, life expectancy has decreased since the 1990s.

These deficits are compounded by the stunning lack of investment by Nevada lawmakers for basic public health services. This year's rankings report indicates that state general fund support for core public health activities – disease surveillance, infectious and chronic disease prevention, and public health preparedness – is a miserly \$33 per person in Nevada (50th).

By comparison, the top state, Hawaii, spends \$227 per capita or nearly seven times what Nevada spends on public health. One of our state's longstanding dirty little secrets is our heavy reliance on public funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other federal agencies routinely pilloried by state politicians and pundits.

Like many states, Nevada has seen significant declines in premature mortality and death rates for cancer and cardiovascular disease, as well as progress made in addressing major risk factors to health, such as cigarette smoking and childhood immunization.

Nonetheless, the latest state rankings report concludes that “these gains are set against a backdrop where different and complex health challenges are compromising our nation’s health. The rates of drug deaths, diabetes, obesity, and children in poverty are currently on the rise.”

This year’s rankings provide Nevada health leaders and policymakers with an opportunity to renew our commitment to confront formidable health challenges in our state in the coming year. To put matters mildly, plenty of work remains for us in 2016.

The complete report can be found at www.americashealthrankings.org.

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