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24 percent of Kanawha residents in fair or poor health, survey finds

By Lori Kersey

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Nearly one in four Kanawha County residents believe their health is just fair or poor, according to a survey of health issues in the county -- a similar rate as in past years.

According to the report, released Tuesday from the Kanawha County Coalition for Community Health Improvement, 24 percent of 259 households questioned say their health is fair or poor. The rest said they are in excellent, very good or good health.

"That's very telling," coalition executive director Judy Crabtree said, adding that 24 percent "is similar to the statewide number but much higher than the national average."

Nationally, 85 percent of people say their health is good, very good or excellent, according to 2010 statistics from the federal Centers for Disease Control. In West Virginia, that number is 77 percent.

Crabtree said that the number of Kanawha County residents in poor or fair health has been consistent over the years.

Beside the survey, the assessment also includes analysis of existing county health data, interviews with professionals who represent key sectors of the community and a health issues forum -- scheduled for Tuesday evening -- to set priorities for the coalition's work.

At a news conference Tuesday morning, coalition leaders announced results of the assessment. Among them: 52 percent of respondents -- the lowest percentage since 1995 -- said that they were better off than they were one year ago.

Residents named obesity, cancer, drug abuse, air quality, diabetes, heart disease, smoking and a lack of health insurance as the biggest health problems in Kanawha County

When asked about healthy behaviors, 37 percent of respondents said they drink at least one sugar-sweetened drink per day. As far as fast food, 33 percent said they ate it one to three times each week; 9 percent said they ate fast food four or more times each week.

Twenty-two percent of respondents said they watched four to six hours of television per day and 8 percent said they watched more than six hours of television a day.

For the first time this year, the survey included questions about emergency preparedness. Sixty percent of those that responded said they would not be able to evacuate their home within 30 minutes if they had to.

When asked about their views on taxes and legislation, 59 percent supported increasing the cigarette tax to \$1.44 per pack, while 63 percent supported an increase in taxes on smokeless tobacco. Sixty percent of respondents supported eliminating secondhand tobacco smoke from all outdoor public places. Ninety percent of respondents supported posting calorie information on restaurant menus and menu boards.

"I doubt that anybody is shocked by the results," said John Ballengee, a member of the KCCHI steering committee, during the press conference. "What the survey does do however is confirm the statistics that we all know are out there and just recognizes that this is the way that our citizens feel at the same time."

Crabtree said the results of the assessment would be used by groups inside and outside the

coalition for their own purposes.

"Many of these organizations utilize the data we collected and the findings of our assessment surveys to apply for and get grants that brings dollars into our community that otherwise would not come into our county," she said.

During a meeting Tuesday night with more than 150 Kanawha County residents, the coalition established three areas of health that need improving in the area. They decided that obesity, lack of physical activity and drug abuse are the top three issues that needs addressed, Crabtree said.

The group chose the issues based on whether or not they could make progress on the issues within the next three years, she said.

The next step will be to get people together to plan how the issues will be addressed. The coalition will begin by looking at the root of the three issues, she said.

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