

Community Needs Assessment

# **Waupaca County**

2008

## Waupaca County Community Needs Assessment Project

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## Introduction

The mission of the Waupaca County Department of Health and Human Services holds at its core the concepts of protection and prevention, protection of the health of the population entrusted to it and prevention of untoward events to the extent possible given circumstances. Foundational to all public health practice is the concept of “primary prevention”, those activities which serve to forestall or eliminate completely adverse outcomes in populations.

In his article entitled “Moving Upstream to Repair the Bridge”, Brad Perry (2006) likens primary prevention activities to going “...upstream to find out what is causing ... people to end up in the river” (p. 3). His metaphor involves a man standing next to a river who sees someone drowning as she floats by. The man jumps into the river and pulls her out, but just as he does so, he sees another person in trouble. The person is again floating downstream and seems to be drowning so he rescues him as well. Every time he saves one person, another appears, and another, and another, and another ... until the man becomes exhausted. It is only at this point that the man begins to think something must be seriously wrong upstream for all these people to be falling into the river and need rescuing. So he heads upriver to check out the situation.

When he arrives upstream, he finds that the bridge people use to cross the river has a huge hole in it. As they attempt to cross, people are falling through the hole into the river and there is no way for them to get out. What is the solution to the problem?

Some would say “lifeguards”! Positioned along the riverbank, lifeguards would be available to pull people out just about as quickly as they fell in and would thus save them from near drowning. Others might offer “lifeboats”! as a viable solution to the problem. With lifeboats available, people could help themselves when they fell in and save the taxpayers some money by eliminating the need to hire

lifeguards. Good solutions? Maybe, but there may be an even more efficacious answer.

With their focus on primary prevention, I am confident that a consultation with the public health professionals in the community would reveal “fix the bridge”! as a more permanent solution to the problem. “Fix the bridge”!! so people are not falling into the river and needing rescue in the first place. Primary prevention at its finest.... public health at its finest....or is it?

Primary prevention is what we tout as a tool of public health...keeping problems from happening...promoting the health of populations. But is that what we actually do or just ... actually..., what we say?

In public health, as in many other facets of our culture, do we too often focus on what Mr. Perry (2006) refers to as “the tangible aftermath of the problem” (p. 3)? Do we keep “pulling people out of the river” by setting up systems to support them only once they have fallen in? For, while these are important, even critical, to be successful in the long term, they must be complimented by systems which “get to the core” of public health issues and so keep people from “falling into the river” in the first place.

Mr. Perry (2006) refers to this as “proactive, upstream thinking” and it challenges the very foundation on which the public health “bridge” is built. It is a more difficult problem-solving process than picking people up after they fall in because it requires “...dismantling, redesigning, and reconstructing the very structure and foundation of the bridge” (p. 3). This is an especially challenging process because it involves beliefs, prejudices, and norms which are “intertwined with the identity of our society” (p. 3).

The poor will always be with us. We are grateful that FoodShare, Energy Assistance, BadgerCare and WIC are also with us. But is it possible that these “lifeboats” come to be in great demand because other components of our system are

lacking...clean air and water, good jobs close to home, safe and affordable housing, access to healthy food, basic healthcare? Are we “plucking people out of the river” using assistance programs because we have not fixed the “hole in the bridge” with sound societal infrastructure?

To quote Mr. Perry (2006) “Before jumping into the work of repairing the bridge, we should first sit down and craft a plan. If our plan is to be effective, we’ll need input from as many pertinent voices as possible. Once we engage all of these folks-these stakeholders-we can start to solicit their input to formulate concrete action plans for bridge repair” (p. 4).

This document is a foundational piece in determining repairs needed on the Waupaca County “bridge”. It helps identify the locations of some of the weaknesses in the bridge infrastructure and suggests prioritization of facets of the bridge repair project. Many partners have been involved in the assessment of the bridge at both state and local levels. Mr. Perry (2006) concludes by stating, “Repairing the bridge will be complex, drawing on a diverse range of skills and resources” (p. 4). Waupaca County is up for the challenge.



## Purpose

“Community assessment is the process of critically thinking about the community and involves getting to know and understand the community as client” (Stanhope & Lancaster, 2000, p. 315). Using published statistics, including morbidity and mortality data, as well as anecdotal information from county residents, the community assessment serves to clarify community issues, identify priority needs and expose potential resources.

In addition to revealing weaknesses in the community structure, assessment also serves to highlight community strengths. “Strong performers can serve as role models for lower ranked places and provide insight into program planning and refinement” (Athens JK, Taylor KW, Bookse BC, Kempf AM, Remington PL, 2007, p. 4).

Finally, the purpose of community assessment is to bring to its citizens, a picture of what their community looks like and what strategies they might undertake to improve its health outcomes. As advised by Athens et al. (2007), working in partnership with the Waupaca County Department of Health and Human Services, county residents can “identify areas of potential health improvement and aid in drawing additional resources to the amelioration of these problems” (p. 4).

Though mandated by state statute, the community needs assessment process can serve to deliver to the people, not only what they say they need, but what has been demonstrated as needed via statistical means. As partners in the health improvement process, community members will see positive changes in health outcomes as coming through their own hands and by their own efforts. Taking ownership of community health issues is assuredly one giant step toward better-informed healthier communities. It is also the ultimate benefit of the needs assessment process.

## **The Concept of Health**

In 1947, the World Health Organization evolved a classic definition of health which carried us well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Health was described as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. With the changes we’ve experienced in the prevalence of chronic diseases, the increase in the older population, and the emergence of environmental issues now seriously affecting the health of populations, Stokes (1982) as quoted in Swanson and Nies (1997), has recommended a definition which more closely reflects our current needs. The new proposed definition of health would be: “Health is a state characterized by anatomic integrity, ability to perform personally valued family, work, and community roles; ability to deal with physical, biologic and social stress, a feeling of well-being; and freedom from the risk of disease and untimely death” (p. 34).

This changes the focus of activities and behaviors to improve health from illness care to “promoting a safe environment, protecting individuals and communities through immunizations, promoting healthier lifestyles, improving nutrition, and providing health services with known efficacy. Measurable outcomes of a health care system based on this definition include life span, disease, discomfort, participation in healthcare, social behavior, and satisfaction” (Blum, 1981, as quoted in Swanson et al, 1997). This definition incorporates all of the components contributing to positive health outcomes and includes all the health determinants cited in the documents used to develop this report. An all-inclusive definition of health provides the foundation for judging the health of a community.