

Community caucus sets health priorities

On an unseasonably warm February Saturday morning, instead of taking the dog for a walk or reading the paper on the porch, several hundred Polk County residents gathered at the Hotel Ft. Des Moines to help decide the future health of Polk County. The event was the Healthy Polk 2020 Community Caucus and marked the culmination of a two-year planning process to develop a community-owned movement to improve the health of Polk County.

“We strongly believe that a community-owned agenda is the only real way to create a change in the health status of our community,” said Polk County Health Department Director Terri Henkels. “Despite the statistics, if the people who live and work here do not believe that something like lack of physical activity is a problem, then we can’t expect them to change their behavior.”

The process began with 54 community conversations during which people who live, work and play in Polk County voiced their opinion about what a healthy Polk County might look like. In addition, 1,200 people completed an on-line survey and 399 people were interviewed over the phone.



After the priorities were chosen, each group outlined steps for meeting each goal by 2020.

Based on those conversations, a list of over 900 priorities was developed. The Healthy Polk 2020 Data Team narrowed that list down to 190 measurable priorities. The 274 individuals who registered for the Community Caucus voted the list down to 27. Participants then held a traditional Iowa caucus that produced the final list of 10 priorities.

After the priorities were finalized, the group broke up into 10 smaller work groups. Each group started developing an initial action plan. During the next six months, these groups will work to identify additional resources available in the community and engage important stakeholders and partners.

“It was a really impressive process to watch unfold,” Henkels said. “The priorities that we developed were based 100 percent on community input; there were no guidelines set or issues that we said must be included. It truly is a plan developed for us, by us as a community.”

Participants in the health caucus chose the following priorities for the health of their community:

- More resources devoted to prevention and wellness.
- Daily physical education in all schools.
- An increase in accessible and affordable public transportation (e.g., buses, trolleys, carpools).
- Health care and insurance coverage for everyone.
- More coverage for families who can't afford private insurance and do not qualify for hawk-i or Title 19.
- Equal access to health care for all.
- More providers focused on prevention, education and wellness.
- More people taking responsibility for their own health.
- Safe, good quality, affordable housing (30 % of income).
- Access to affordable, healthy food.

Prevent
Epidemics & the
Spread of Disease

Promote
Healthy
Behaviors

Prepare for,
Respond to, &
Recover from PH
Emergencies

Prevent injuries

Strengthen the
Public Health
Infrastructure

Protect Against
Environmental
Hazards