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West Virginia near bottom of national health rankings

by Paul Fallon Daily Mail Staff

CHARLESTON, W.Va.--America's Health Rankings for 2010 have been released and West Virginia has moved closer to the bottom of the pile.

The state has fallen one spot to 43 in the nation, according to the report. The United Health Foundation, the American Public Health Association and Partnership for Prevention have released the health rankings for 21 straight years. It is the longest running report of its kind.

Jessica Wright, director of the state Bureau of Public Health's Division of Health Promotion and Chronic Disease, does not think there is a magic bullet to fix the state's health woes. Instead, reversing residents' health problems will take a combination of state policy changes and improvements in people's personal decisions.

"I don't know what the answer is to improve our ranking," Wright said. "There are so many challenges in West Virginia, it's really going to be hard to change."

Although the state has seen an improvement in the percentage of the population that smokes, dropping from 26.5 in 2009 to 25.5 percent this year, it is still listed as a major health issue. The percent of West Virginians who smoke is 8 percent higher than the national average, according to the study.

Bruce Adkins, director of the Division of Tobacco Prevention for the Bureau of Public Health, said health officials are working diligently to curtail smoking.

For example, the bureau has assisted county health departments in enacting 100 percent clean indoor air policies prohibiting smoking in any enclosed work area. The state also has been successful in keeping youths from taking up the habit, he said.

"Over 50 percent of our youth have never tried tobacco products," Adkins said. "And that is a significant improvement from over a decade ago when that number was about half what it is today."

However, Adkins believes the state should increase the cigarette tax to help reduce the number of people who smoke. The West Virginia rate is 55 cents a pack, he said. The national average is \$1.30.

"We know that people quit smoking when the price of cigarettes goes up," he said. "And young people just don't start smoking when prices are high."

He would like to see the tax on smokeless tobacco increased, too. The state currently taxes smokeless tobacco to the tune of 17 percent of the wholesale price, Adkins said.

Adkins also would like to see state and federal funding for the bureau increased so it could expand the number of smoking cessation programs.

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"We could certainly help more people quit smoking if we had more cessation programs," he said.

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Smoking is not the only major health issue facing West Virginians. According to the study, 31.7 percent of the state's population is considered obese. The rate has decreased from 31.9 percent in 2009.

Wright believes stronger policies are needed to help combat obesity. For example, she would like to see a state policy mandating healthier eating choices in all restaurants, convenience stores and cafeterias.

She says the state school system already has high nutritional standards and the rest of the state could follow suit. "Why can't apples, bananas and fresh vegetables be available as an option at restaurants and cafeterias?" she asked.

Dr. Jamie Jeffrey, medical director of the Children's Medicine Center at Charleston Area Medical Center's Women and Children's Hospital, also thinks state leaders need to take a hard look at changing policies to promote healthier eating habits.

She said leaders should explore options such as a sugar tax on items such as sodas and cereals.

But she acknowledged that taxing food items is a double-edged sword.

"Everyone needs to eat," she said. "And how do you tax something that everyone needs to do?"

Although she admits it will be difficult to change residents' eating habits, she emphasized that it is very important for the state to do something very soon to combat obesity, especially in children.

"I'm treating children who have diseases we used to only see in adults," she said. "We can't wait 30 or 40 years to do something about this."

Jeffrey and Wright agreed one way to combat obesity is to increase residents' physical activity. Wright said she would like to see more employers incorporate physical activity opportunities into the workplace.

"It would be helpful if employers had accommodations for physical activity in the work place along with showers and changing facilities," she said.

However, she did not think the state should implement any policies requiring businesses to do so.

Wright said economic issues make it difficult for state residents to become healthier. She believes the state will not become significantly healthier until all West Virginians have equal access to health care and education.

"West Virginians need substantial jobs and insurance coverage," she said. "And until the basic needs of the individual are met, I don't know if our health status will ever improve significantly."

For the second straight year, Vermont was listed as the healthiest state in the nation and Mississippi was the worst. Other than Mississippi, only Kentucky, Alabama, Oklahoma, Nevada, Arkansas and Louisiana were considered unhealthier than West Virginia.

Information for the report is gathered from agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Medical Association, U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Census Bureau, said Dr. Reed Tuckson, a board member for the United Health Foundation.

Tuckson said states can use the health rankings to identify strengths and weaknesses and compare those with other states.

"The United Health Foundation believes that these health challenges can best be addressed through public-private partnerships at the state and local level," Tuckson said. Contact writer Paul Fallon at paul.fal...@dailymail.com or 304-348-4817.