

TRANSYLVANIA COUNTY 2015 CHA EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose and Process

A comprehensive picture of the health status of Transylvania County residents includes a core regional dataset of secondary (existing) and primary (newly-collected) data, as well as additional community-level data gathered from organizations throughout Transylvania County. The core dataset compiled by WNC Healthy Impact includes a comprehensive set of publically available secondary data metrics with our county compared to the sixteen-county WNC region as our "peer"; a set of maps accessed from Community Commons and NC Center for Health Statistics; a telephone survey of a random sample of adults in the county; and an email survey of community leaders and other key informants. In addition, an inventory of available community resources was conducted through reviewing a subset of existing resources currently listed in the 2-1-1 database for our county as well as working with partners to fill in additional information.

Key partners Transylvania Public Health and Transylvania Regional Hospital, worked with representatives from numerous health care, community, and government organizations throughout Transylvania County to review data on 10 health issues and select the county's top three health priorities to be the county's focus for the next three years.

Data Summary

Community

Transylvania County is located in the Appalachian Mountains of western North Carolina, with elevations reaching from 1,265 to 6,045 feet above sea level. The county has a total area of 381 square miles, and half of this area is protected forestland. Known as the "Land of Waterfalls," Transylvania County is known for its natural beauty, number of natural waterfalls, and annual rainfall.

Transylvania County was home to approximately 33,090 residents in 2010, with a median age (48.8) that is several years older than the state average (37.9). Its population growth is expected to slow through 2020, but the percent of senior adults in the county is expected to continue to rise. Transylvania County has higher a proportion of whites (92.4%) than the region or state and lower proportions of all racial and ethnic minority groups. Only 0.8% of households have limited skill in speaking English About 19% of households had children under age 18, and 69% of these were headed by a married couple. (US Census Bureau)

Transylvania County's assets include its natural environment and location, its people, its sense of community, and access to health care. Issues that need to be addressed in order to improve

quality of life include employment and the economy, housing, education, transportation, health care, community and culture, and social services.

Health Outcomes

People in Transylvania County have lower mortality than the population statewide for nine of the twelve leading causes of death for which there are stable county rates. The only causes of death for which mortality rates are higher in Transylvania County than in North Carolina are unintentional non-motor vehicle injuries, suicide, and liver disease. (NC State Center for Health Statistics) These rates are closely linked to substance abuse and mental health issues. The county's top two causes of death: heart disease and cancer are closely linked to an aging population, access to health care and screening exams, tobacco use, and nutrition, physical activity, and weight.

Populations at Risk

The populations most at risk for negative health outcomes include racial and ethnic minorities, those who do not speak English, those living in poverty, those without health insurance, young children, older adults, and those who have certain health-related behaviors (such as tobacco use or lack of physical activity).

Health Priorities

The following health issues were identified as priorities:

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is linked to a number of poor health outcomes in Transylvania County. Key informants reported that the most problematic substances for the county were prescription drugs and alcohol. The entire WNC region sees high mortality rates due to unintentional poisoning related to medication and drug overdose. However, the most recent rates of unintentional poisoning related to drug overdose in Transylvania County were approximately 35% higher than the regional rates and 1.8 times the state rates. (Professional Research Consultants, Inc., 2015) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013) A second cause of higher-than-expected mortality is liver disease: although the percentage of "excessive drinkers" in Transylvania County falls below the state average and the Healthy People 2020 Target, there is a strong association between alcohol abuse and chronic liver disease and cirrhosis. In addition, substance abuse is associated with suicide, which is the third cause of death in which Transylvania County rates are higher than the state rates.

Mental Health

Mental health is a new health priority for Transylvania County, related to mortality and morbidity statistics, an understanding of the relationship between substance abuse and mental health issues, and a lack of necessary mental health treatment and counseling options in the county, especially for those who have little income or no insurance. More than 16% of county residents reported having seven or more days of poor mental health in the past month and nearly 6% reported being “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with life. In addition, over 5% of residents reported being unable to get needed mental health care or counseling in the past year. Barriers to mental health care include the number and size of facilities and providers, transportation, cost and lack of health insurance, stigma, and environmental and family situations.

Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Weight

Transylvania County’s top two causes of death and many of our morbidity statistics of concern are directly affected by nutrition, physical activity, and weight. Excess weight increases an individual’s risk of developing type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, certain cancers, and stroke. Transylvania County residents reported about half of the recommended servings of fruits and vegetables in the past week, and 1/3 said it was difficult for them to access fresh produce at an affordable price. More than 58% of children enrolled in Transylvania County Schools qualify for free and reduced lunch programs in 2014-2015, and 29% of children in Transylvania County struggle with food insecurity. Despite living in an environment that promotes recreation-based tourism and offers many outdoor physical activities, only half of county residents said they got the recommended amount of daily physical activity, and about 1/3 said they were limited in activities in some way due to a physical, mental, or emotional problem. A rural county with a limited number of well-paying jobs and high cost of housing results in long commutes, less money for groceries and recreation, and limited access to stores that sell nutritious foods.

Next Steps

This document will be distributed widely to the CHA Team, those who participated in the priority-setting workshop, the Transylvania County Board of Health, other organizations, and interested community members.

Collaborative action planning with hospitals and other community partners will result in community-wide action plans for each of these priority health issues, including evidence-based strategies intended to directly address key indicators for the selected issues, to be submitted by Transylvania Public Health to the NC Division of Public Health in September 2016.