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Idaho counties' health rated

COEUR d'ALENE - A new university study ranks Idaho's counties on overall health, and places Kootenai County at 12th among the 42 counties that had sufficient data to be included in the report.

"The information is no surprise," said Jeanne Bock, director of the Panhandle Health District. "It comes from reports that health districts submit and others we study to plan programs to improve health in our counties."

Cynthia Taggart, spokeswoman for the health district, said residents here "should understand this shows Kootenai County as being fairly healthy, which we know we are, but there are some areas we can work on."

Latah County has Idaho's "healthiest residents," the report announced Wednesday. The report was developed by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, and was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and was undertaken to motivate communities to improve.

Taggart said a low ranking doesn't mean a county is unhealthy, but that living healthy, as defined by the report, is more difficult to achieve in some counties than others.

She said the areas compared included: Low-birth weights, numbers of sick days, people's description of their health as fair or poor, tobacco and alcohol use, exercise, diet and access to health food, unsafe sex, access to health care and quality of care, education, employment and income, family and social support, community safety, and air quality.

She said the study identifies which counties are successful in certain areas so other counties can learn from them.

Taggart said Kootenai County ranked high for access to and quality of health care, and has a high number of primary-care doctors for its population, and a low number of preventable hospital stays. Kootenai County ranks third in the report's category called "critical care," which includes access to care and quality of care.

Thomas DeTar, chief of staff at Kootenai Health, the umbrella corporation that operates Kootenai Medical Center, said "It's hard to assess how accurate these report cards are."

The newest data used in the study was from 2008, depending on the category. For other categories, the most recent data used was from 2005 or 2006. He said he has some "scientific skepticism" about the rankings, not knowing if the data were valid, or how the study was done.

Plus, "when it comes to ranking of a county, the choices people make will have an effect on an overall community," DeTar said. "It does come down to individual choices."

DeTar said the quality of physicians in the area is high, because of the quality of life doctors can find here. "It's such a beautiful area to live in," DeTar said. "The physicians we have here could really go anywhere."

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He said there are enough primary-care providers that residents have a reasonable chance of finding a primary-care provider, but there still is a shortage. "Primary-care access is a concern, and we're trying to recruit more of those doctors here," DeTar said.

The report said the target for Kootenai County is 141 primary-care doctors, and that the county has 110, a number DeTar said sounds high. Taggart, of the health district, said Benewah County finished in the top third of counties for how long its residents live. Meanwhile, Benewah ranked last in Idaho for how healthy and happy its residents claim to be, and for its high unemployment rate and for its "very low high school graduation rate," she said.

Shoshone County ranked in the top third of counties for nearly hitting its target of uninsured adults, and for having a fairly high number of primary-care providers for its population, Taggart said. It ranked near the bottom for how long its residents live, how happy and healthy residents claim to be, and smoking, drinking alcohol, and exercise.

Gary Retter, owner of Peak Health & Wellness Center here, said the Kootenai County area is saturated with fitness centers, providing residents with plenty of access to exercise facilities, and sources to learn healthy eating habits. Dana Davis, a weight management coach there, said many people don't know how many calories to consume.

"They don't know how to eat," she said. Too much food is eaten that's fast and convenient, and not healthy.

Retter said, "We have room to help more people." However, many people quit exercising and eating well when they don't get the results they want quickly. Kathy Gentry, 41, who was working out at Peak on Wednesday, said she has been working out since she was a teenager, and remains motivated. She said there are plenty of opportunities for people here to get into shape and improve their health.

Gentry said even when she lived in Blanchard, and her access to facilities were limited there, she would commute into Spokane, Post Falls, and other places to work out. "It feels great when you're done," she said.

Idaho's 10 "healthiest" counties, starting with most healthy, are Latah, Madison, Blaine, Franklin, Ada, Jefferson, Idaho, Power, Kootenai and Valley, the report said. The 10 counties in the poorest health, starting with least healthy, are Lincoln, Lewis, Shoshone, Bear Lake, Butte, Clearwater, Gooding, Jerome, Boundary and Boise, it said.