

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: Not-so-well-being

Health of area women fares poorly compared with rest of state

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — A class of advanced undergraduate students worked this spring with the Laura W. Bush Institute for Women's Health and with ASU's Community Development Initiatives to produce the first-ever Women's Index for the Concho Valley. This special edition of Pathways to Progress presents the results.

BACKGROUND

The National Institutes of Health remarks in its current strategic plan for improving women's health that "the health of women has a direct bearing on the health of their families and communities, and ultimately, the health of societies."

The point is well taken since women's bodies and behavior directly feed everyone's healthy development through birth. Beyond that, it is women who do most to monitor health and behavior in most households and families, and to link household members to health information and access to health care services. Most often, women are primary care agents for children, spouses and other household members, including themselves.

Playing off the essential place of women in family and community health, the National Women's Law Center has been working for the past decade to develop a comprehensive set of standards for women's health. Its Women's Health Report Card assesses changes in women's well-being at the national and state levels to encourage action toward improvement. It provides a model framework that the ASU students adapted to create a more locally focused assessment of women's health in the Concho Valley.

The Report Card assigns grades to the nation and each state reflecting progress toward NWLC goals set with the advice of experts and health agencies. Texas was one of 12 states with an overall failing grade in the latest Women's Health Report Card for 2010. The results show Texas as a state with only a few strong areas such as a high percentage of women having timely mammograms and colorectal cancer screenings. There were many more weaknesses for Texas according to the Report Card.

The need for communities to set goals and organize actions to improve women's health is important for the future viability and vitality of families, households, and communities. The utility of the NWLC Report Card, however, is limited by its lack of relevance to local communities for two reasons.

First, the NWLC data is focused only at the national and state levels. In a state as expansive as Texas, use of data focused only at these levels necessarily glosses over very large differences between the state's regions, counties, cities and towns on the diseases women contend with, their causes of death, their levels of education and economic standing, and numerous other relevant factors. Data that more clearly pinpoints local conditions for women is essential for any community level goal setting possibilities.

Second, when viewed from a local perspective, the NWLC Report Card also has a "one-size-fits-all" appearance because it seeks to provide a common standard for all communities to strive toward. Hence, it may be useful to set a standard that says all women should have health insurance (100 percent coverage).

On the other hand, such a standard may be unrealistic as an action goal for a sparsely populated West Texas county that has 40 percent of the female population without health insurance. A more appropriate goal for them may be to work toward getting females insured at levels similar to neighboring counties that have more coverage. After all, raising the levels for counties will lift the state as well.

INDEX FOR THE CONCHO VALLEY

The new [LWBIWH Women's Index for the Concho Valley](#) solves both limitations of NWLC's national report. The [Concho Valley Index](#) is best viewed as an annual health and wellness "lab checkup" on the counties of the region. And like other checkups, it offers a platform of data to guide collaborative planning to improve the state of women's health in the region. It should be used as an occasion for groups and communities to discuss and reflect on possibilities for improvement.

The "lab work" includes 22 total community health measures. Five factors in the "lab work" involve women's access to health care; four look at maternal health; five work with leading causes of death; three detail death from chronic conditions; and five are on demographic risk factors.

The "lab report" includes outcomes for each county. Additional comparisons with corresponding statewide outcomes create a framework for discussion of county-level public health goals for women's health and wellness. These are called "Raising Texas Goals" because any actions initiated to improve one or more of them would improve the local county while lifting the state as well.

The "lab report" also uses unique scoring to show where each county stands in relation to the other Concho Valley counties. A 0-to-100-point rating indicates how a county is

doing compared to other counties in the region. Higher ratings mean the county has better public health outcomes for women than other parts of the Concho Valley.

The "Total Index" row in the summary table identifies Irion County with the best overall score of 75 based on its average for all 22 community health outcomes. Sterling County followed Irion with a score of 74. Schleicher County (69) was next, followed by Tom Green (66), Mason (62), Kimble (61), Coke (57), Concho (55), Crockett and McCulloch (each 51), and Sutton and Reagan counties (each 49). Menard scored lowest with an overall average of 37.

The summary table also shows which counties scored high and low on the groups of outcomes dealing with health care access, maternal health, leading causes of death, chronic conditions and demographic risk factors. The actual indicator data results for the high and low scoring counties are provided as well.

The three right hand columns of information in the summary table give the most comprehensive data spelling out women's health challenges for the Concho Valley region. The "Concho Valley Average" column gives the 13-county average rating scores for each group of outcomes and for all 22 "Total Index" factors.

Hence, the 13 Concho Valley counties had an average rating of 56 on the five indicator outcomes dealing with women's access to health care. The "TEXAS" column shows the statewide score of 59 based on the same five outcomes.

Reading down the "Concho Valley Average" and "TEXAS" columns reveals that the local region scored lower than the state as a whole in four of the five outcome groups. The group of maternal health indicators is the exception where the regional counties have an average score of 66 compared to the statewide 61.

Overall, the "Total Index" at the bottom of the table shows an average rating score of 58 for the Concho Valley on all 22 outcomes. This compares to a statewide rating of 67 for all outcomes.

The "Number of Raising Texas Goals" column is printed in red to spotlight instances where Concho Valley counties have women's health outcomes that are worse than parallel statewide results.

For example, reading the row for Indicator 2 in the table reveals that the Concho Valley counties average 33.1 percent of Females Uninsured. The reported 10 Raising Texas Goals identifies the number of specific counties in the region that have higher percentages of Females Uninsured than the statewide level of 28.9 percent. Consequently, if one or more of those 10 counties organized initiatives to reduce the number of Females Uninsured, such actions would go far to improve public health conditions for women in that local community, in the Concho Valley region, and in the state.

Altogether, 22 indicator measurements for 13 counties create 286 possible instances of a regional county having a worse outcome than the state overall. As the summary

table shows, worse outcomes for Concho Valley counties actually occurred 164 times, or for 57 percent of the possible instances.

Put simply, when we use a variety of measures to take the temperature of Concho Valley counties on various conditions of women's health and wellness, the local counties lag behind the state more than half the time.

Remembering the State of Texas was one of 12 states with a failing grade on the NWLC's national Report Card, the evidence from the LWBIWH Women's Index for the Concho Valley should alert hospitals, clinics, insurers, employers, county, city and regional officials, and other health partners to work better together to improve the health and wellness of women. We can do better.

Online editor's note: To view the index of each of the counties in the LWBIWH Women's Index for the Concho Valley, [please click here](#).

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