

Sense of the Assembly

Sedgwick County Assembly: Prescription for Healthy Citizens

On January 1, 2002, the Board of Sedgwick County Commissioners assumed administrative and primary financial responsibility for the Health Department in Sedgwick County. With the transition of authority for public health services, Sedgwick County decision makers have a unique opportunity to chart strategic directions for public health in the community. Sedgwick County, in partnership with the Hugo Wall School of Urban Public Affairs at Wichita State University, sought public participation in defining critical issues in community health and developing strategic actions drawing upon focus groups, a county-wide survey, and a community discussion through the *Sedgwick County Assembly: Prescription for Healthy Citizens*.

The Assembly was led by Board of Sedgwick County Commissioners and its underwriting partners: Wichita State University, Kansas Health Foundation, Via Christi Regional Medical Center, United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, Kansas Department of Health and Environment, Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, City of Wichita, The University of Kansas School of Medicine-Wichita, Medical Society of Sedgwick County and Preferred Plus of Kansas.

More than 140 people convened for the *Sedgwick County Assembly: Prescription for Healthy Citizens*, March 12 and 13, 2004, on the Wichita State University campus. In advance of the Assembly, participants reviewed background papers prepared and compiled by Dr. Joe Pisciotte and Jo Turner with the Hugo Wall School and Dr. S. Edwards Dismuke, Dean, University of Kansas School of Medicine-Wichita.

The Assembly started with a keynote address by Dr. Jeffrey Koplan, Vice President for Academic Health Affairs, Woodruff Health Sciences Center, Emory University, and former Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Koplan addressed the impact of public health initiatives in the past 100 years. He explained that public health programs such as immunization, auto safety, well-mother and infant programs, and other public health initiatives have accounted for reduced health care costs and a 30-year increase in life expectancy during the past century.

The Assembly continued with Professor Mark Glaser of the Hugo Wall School, who reviewed findings from a survey on health issues completed by over 6,000 registered voters in Sedgwick County. In addition, panel presenters provided insight to four specific policy concerns of the Assembly, which were: ***Prevention*** presented by Mr. Roderick Bremby, Secretary of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment; ***Access*** presented by Dr. Dismuke; ***Vulnerable Populations*** presented by Ms. Lorraine Dold Bockorny, CEO/President of Rainbows United, Inc.; and ***Health Care Coordination*** presented by Dr. Paul N. Uhlig, Dartmouth University Medical School.

On Friday afternoon participants met in small groups and discussed the policy issues defined as:

Access: *Insufficient access to health care, including the growing uninsured and underinsured populations, who should pay and how much, and the appropriate balance between community and individual responsibility for health care.*

Prevention: *Inadequate prevention activities and promotion of health and wellness, including preventing injuries and illness, promoting health and wellness, providing education and resources on health care, managing the transition from reaction to prevention, and tracking and preventing the spread of disease.*

Vulnerable Populations: *Overlooked needs of vulnerable populations, such as seniors, children and adults with mental health disabilities, children and adults with physical disabilities, and other high-risk individuals.*

Health Care Coordination: *Issues of health care coordination including optimizing resource allocation, increasing coordination of patient care, ensuring quality of service and cost effectiveness, and establishing common data collection and assessment.*

In each policy area Assembly participants were asked to address the following questions:

1. *What is the community's central responsibility, or goal, in this policy area and what are the most important actions that should be taken to accomplish this goal?*
2. *What partnerships are necessary to fulfill this action? Who should do what? Who is involved? Who pays?*
3. *What are the immediate first steps that should be undertaken toward accomplishment of this action?*

After addressing issues of health care in breakout groups, participants reconvened in plenary session on Saturday morning to hear and discuss recommendations from each group. Participants were then asked to identify recommendations of highest priority, and this process produced substantial agreement, which is summarized in the following "Sense of the Assembly."

Sense of the Assembly

While Assembly participants worked independently in the four separate policy areas, central themes were evident during the reports and prioritizing on Saturday morning. Following are priority recommendations of the Assembly:

Create An Integrated System of Community Health

The cost of health care and access to health care services represents a growing concern across the nation. While expenditures for health care increase at alarming rates, many Americans suffer from poorer health. Health care insurance has increased 11.1 percent annually on average over the past 30 years, and Americans now spend 15 percent of their personal income on health care. In the survey of Sedgwick County voters, nearly three in every four viewed rising health care costs as limiting the ability of American businesses to compete in a global economy.

Throughout the deliberation process, Assembly participants expressed a strong preference for better utilization of resources through an integrated system of community health. Sedgwick County voters registered this same preference for a more integrated system of community health in the community survey.

Assembly participants began the process of defining an integrated system of community health for Sedgwick County by identifying three key strategic directions:

- ***Engage Key Stakeholders in Coordination***

Establishing an integrated system of community health will require the engagement of key stakeholders in health care coordination, as well as in resolving the policy issues of access, prevention, and vulnerable populations. Assembly participants indicated that such engagement should be a top priority and suggested Sedgwick County should take the lead in initiating this process. Key stakeholders were identified as private and nonprofit health care providers, local and state governments, consumers, nonprofit agencies, large and small businesses, faith-based organizations, health insurance industry, education and special interest organizations. Initial goals of engagement would include, but not be limited to:

1. Ensuring an integrated system of community health
2. Developing effective resource allocation planning
3. Securing collaboration on programming and services
4. Collecting and sharing data for analysis
5. Employing strategic planning for future activities
6. Serving consumers in “resource discovery”

- ***Improve Communication and Information on Community Health***

Developing more effective means for communication and education on community health, including social marketing campaigns, was identified by Assembly participants as a top priority for developing an integrated system for community health. Participants indicated that communication and education to improvements in prevention and health care coordination and suggested that initial steps include:

1. Promoting existing health care services
2. Endorsing healthy lifestyle choices and wellness programs
3. Educating the public on public health concerns of all people, including vulnerable populations
4. Energizing the public about a preferred health future

- ***Assess Demand for Service and Available Resources***

Assembly participants called for identifying and analyzing the spectrum of health care services in order to maximize available resources for consumers and develop an integrated system of community health. Assessment was

viewed as integral to improving coordination of services, and participants suggested first steps, as follows:

1. Identifying the number of uninsured and underinsured people
2. Inventorying health care services
3. Collaborating on data collection and analysis
4. Reviewing existing resources and leverage existing funds to maximize resources
5. Identifying opportunities for collaboration

Emphasize Prevention and Co-Production of Healthy Lifestyles

Assembly participants assigned top priority to promoting healthy behaviors and emphasizing that a healthy community results when citizens co-produce good health through individual choices. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 50 percent of life expectancy is influenced by lifestyle choices. Sedgwick County voters affirmed this conclusion as nearly three of every five see health problems as a product of personal behavior and lifestyle. Nearly four in five voters expressed support for investments in services that encourage lifestyle changes regarding tobacco use or obesity to reduce long-term health risks and costs. Steps toward prevention and co-production of healthy lifestyles included:

1. Developing incentives for changing behavior to healthy lifestyles and wellness
2. Improving dental and oral health through fluoridation of water supply
3. Promoting a tobacco free community
4. Establishing programs in schools, workplaces, and community facilities to decrease obesity

Increase Access to Health Care Services

Experts estimate that 50,000 Sedgwick County residents have no health insurance. This reality places severe burdens on health clinics and emergency services that often become the health care options of last resort. Economic downturns exacerbate problems of access to health care services. According to the community survey, fewer than one in three voters report they do not worry about the cost of health care because their family has good health insurance coverage. Voters express support for investments in improved access. Four in five respondents supported investments in services that help families without health insurance to identify health care concerns and take action to reduce or avoid illness or injury. Specific recommendations to improve access to health care included:

1. Creating incentives for business and nonprofit organizations to collaborate and develop health insurance options for uninsured workers
2. Developing a mechanism to assess community need and availability of services on a routine basis to address the fluctuating number of uninsured
3. Investigating existing models of alternative healthcare coverage and funding sources in order to increase access to health care

Address Needs of Vulnerable Populations

Assembly participants expressed their belief that anyone at anytime could find himself or herself vulnerable through illness or injury; therefore, identifying the specific requirements of vulnerable populations represents a difficult task. While specific services for the elderly, mentally disabled, and physically disabled are called for, these services must be flexible to be delivered on a continual or emergency basis.

In support of Assembly conclusions, Sedgwick County voters also express support for services to vulnerable populations: 92 percent support investments in services for disadvantaged children; 90 percent support investments in community organizations to serve people with mental disabilities; 84 percent support investments in services for uninsured pregnant mothers; and 82 percent support investments in services to improve or maintain the physical and mental health of senior citizens. Specific recommendations for vulnerable populations included:

1. Improving coordination among health care providers serving vulnerable populations within Sedgwick County
2. Identifying available resources and leveraging those resources for vulnerable populations
3. Defining a process for effective allocation of resources
4. Collaborating with partners on social marketing campaigns that educate the public and envision a preferred future for vulnerable populations

Develop A Comprehensive Finance Plan

Assembly participants outlined strategic directions for community health that will require financing. Developing an integrated system of community health calls for a review of current financing for community health and consideration of alternatives. According to the community survey nearly two in three Sedgwick County voters express a willingness to pay a half-cent increase in sales tax to support investments in community health if combined with a decrease in property taxes. Forty-five percent of the voters qualified their response as “probably” willing, compared to 20 percent as “definitely” willing to support this alternative. Further, this support was conditioned on the assurance that voters would receive more information on the investments being considered. Specific steps regarding community health financing included:

1. Reviewing existing resource allocations
2. Engaging all stakeholders in creating the integrated system of community health
3. Identifying opportunities for efficiencies of service delivery
4. Establishing prevention programs to decrease avoidable health care expenses
5. Emphasizing benefits to the business community and insurance industry in developing the integrated system of community health
6. Collaborating to improve funding opportunities with state, federal and private foundations
7. Developing incentives for participating in an integrated system of community health

Assembly participants engaged in a lively and passionate discussion of community health and outlined strategic directions for a plan of action. Top priorities for improving the health of the community were identified. Most importantly, the Assembly confirmed and supported the goal for filling the prescription for healthy citizens in Sedgwick County.