

COUNTY HEALTH RANKINGS

Santa Cruz slips down a notch to 12th

United Way targeting youth violence, binge drinking, homelessness, obesity

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SANTA CRUZ » Leaders at United Way of Santa Cruz County are targeting five areas to improve the county's health ranking, which slipped from 11th to 12th in the state this year.

The rankings, produced annually by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, are based on 30 factors that influence health including violent crime, excessive drinking, education, housing, jobs, diet and exercise.

Megan Joseph, director of community organizing at United Way, said efforts this year will focus on addressing youth violence, curbing binge drinking, reducing homelessness, preventing obesity, and emphasizing health in all policy decisions.

Violent crime overall is down but 2014 was particularly deadly for Watsonville, which saw 10 homicides, six involving youth and half involving gangs.

A new countywide Youth Violence Prevention Strategic Plan, approved by the Santa Cruz County Criminal Justice Council, begins implementation this

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month in Watsonville and Santa Cruz, with the rest of the county to follow.

The first meeting of the Watsonville Mayor's Youth Violence Prevention Initiative will take place 2 to 4 p.m. Wednesday at the Watsonville Police Department.

The strategic plan takes a public health approach to addressing violence, with a focus on improving the high school graduation rate, 90 percent county-wide, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, and 52 percent in Watsonville.

Another focus will be on connecting neighbors, family engagement and law enforcement relations with the community. In 2013, nearly a third of 230 South County residents surveyed indicated concern about gangs.

Excessive drinking in Santa Cruz County increased from 19 percent in 2011 to 21 percent in 2015, based on the Centers for Disease Control Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance.

Community Prevention Partners has been working with local alcohol merchants to reduce youth access.

"We are also working with the city of Watsonville and the Sheriff's Office to strengthen and implement policy and enforcement tools to help mitigate the negative impacts of the oversaturation of alcohol outlets in certain areas," Joseph said.

The new countywide strategic plan on homelessness aims to provide permanent supportive housing, building on the success of

COUNTY HEALTH RANKINGS

Here are the top 12 healthiest counties in California, based on 30 factors including violent crime, adult obesity, air quality, education, children in poverty, housing, smoking and jobs.

County	2015 rank	2014 rank
Marin	1	1
Placer	2	2
Santa Clara	3	3
San Mateo	4	4
Orange	5	6
Yolo	6	5
El Dorado	7	7
Sonoma	8	12
San Luis Obispo	9	9
San Benito	10	10
Nevada	11	8
Santa Cruz	12	11

Source: County health rankings

housing more than 200 people in 180 days.

"We know that homelessness increases risk for mortality," Joseph said.

Adult obesity in the county increased 2 percent for the first time in three years, rising to 22 percent, based on data from the National Diabetes Surveillance System and the Centers for Disease Control Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance.

In December, the Go For Health Collaborative expanded its focus from childhood obesity to obesity prevention for all after recognizing the need to work with families and the entire community.

"We will focus on building leadership capacity, public policy and education and awareness," Joseph said.

The county Health Services Agency received a grant to initiate a "Health in All Policies" initiative, which will mean discussing with policymakers and others how to ensure health is considered in decision-making.

"This approach will im-

pact nearly every factor listed in the county health rankings," Joseph predicted, pointing out in many of the measures, "We are at least as well off as we were in previous years."

Some statistics unchanged from the prior year: 10 percent of adults smoke, 71 percent are solo commuters, and 5.8 percent of babies weigh less than 5.5 pounds at birth. When the health rankings were first released six years ago, Santa Cruz was the seventh healthiest county in the state.

The county's 2015 score was hurt by drinking water violations at Olympia Water and Las Cumbres reported to the Environmental Protection Agency, and particle pollution which is caused by smoke in the air, which affects San Lorenzo Valley.

This year, Sonoma County jumped up in the rankings from 12th to 8th, due to a drop in violent crime, low birthweight babies and premature deaths.