

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Hancock County Strives to be No. 1

By Charlee Beasor

“Top 10” rankings have become commonplace for Indiana’s business climate. The state’s manufacturing job growth is second to none. Overall job growth is second in the nation since July 2009.

But, like any compelling tale, there is a twist. And unfortunately, it’s an expensive one.

While the Hoosier state is near the top of many economic lists, Indiana falls to the bottom of the pack in most health indexes. These include obesity, diabetes, smoking and overall well-being, reports Chuck Gillespie, executive director of the Wellness Council of Indiana (WCI). And Indiana’s health care premium costs were sixth in the nation in 2015, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

“We are sixth in obesity, bottom 10 overall in well-being,” Gillespie declares. “We are a high health care cost state.”

An increasing number of companies are taking steps to correct those measures by promoting workplace wellness programs and cultivating healthy environments. But the problem is deeper than just 40 hours per week – it will take whole communities coming together to make real change.

“The influences at home are probably more influential than at work. We’ve got to understand if somebody is trying to stop smoking at work, but their spouse or friends are smoking, their chance of succeeding goes down,” he notes.

That’s where the Indiana Healthy Community Initiative (IHCI) comes in: to take health and wellness to entire communities, and continue crafting Indiana’s economic success story.

“What we are finding is that healthy communities are really a manifestation of economic growth and development,” Gillespie says. “That’s what the whole premise is about – really driving economic growth and development for these workplaces so that



Hancock County and the city of Greenfield are working to be the first community designated an Indiana Healthy Community by the Wellness Council of Indiana.

when companies want to relocate to Indiana, they’re relocating in communities where health is a priority.”

Achieving together

Through the IHCI, the Wellness Council has laid out a roadmap for communities interested in attaining the Indiana Healthy Community designation. There are eight key components, such as working with various community leaders, getting citizens involved, analyzing political atmospheres and ensuring environments are best for making healthy choices.

As with the organization’s AchieveWELL program for individual businesses, the WCI offers best practices and guidance for communities to develop or identify their short- and long-term health goals.

“A lot of what we’re trying to do is work with key leaders. Be it your county leaders, your local chamber leaders, your local health care leaders,” Gillespie confirms. “We want them to lead the effort – what we want to do is come in and help manifest or evolve their existing goals.”

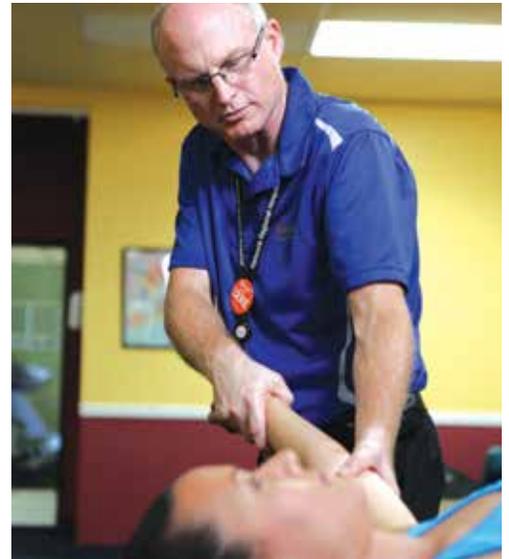
Movement moment

Hancock Regional Hospital and the city of Greenfield are trying to start a movement. And the people working to make Hancock County the healthiest in the state of Indiana want to be No. 1 – as in the first county to earn the distinction of being an Indiana Healthy Community.

“Movement. That is the right word. This is not a program. This is not a company or a business. It’s a movement,” asserts Steve Long, president and CEO of Hancock Regional.

The county was the first to submit an application to the WCI. It was also the first to ban smoking in public places. And Hancock ranks fifth best for health outcomes and sixth for health factors of Indiana’s 92 counties.

But the challenges remain: obesity is at 35% (state average is 31%), not to mention that the county’s rural geography (almost half the population lives in a rural area) makes getting all citizens access to quality health care challenging. And the most common health risks for the state are not unique to Hancock County: obesity (and related diseases),



Prevention and helping the at-risk population are areas of emphasis for Hancock Regional Hospital; a new wellness center in McCordsville and sports medicine are part of the efforts.

smoking, mental health and substance abuse, and access to health care for low-income residents.

“Unfortunately we are not that unique (in those regards),” Long notes. “But, we are unique in that we have the vision as a community and a county to actually do something about it.”

Staying accountable

Hancock Regional Hospital is focusing on chronic disease prevention. A wellness center in Greenfield, as well as a new one in McCordsville, help reach at-risk populations.

“We understand there are a lot of people we don’t treat, but in the future we will be held accountable for their health status,” Long admits. “This is about environment and public policy, but also the folks that are in the at-risk populations, and we don’t even know who they are until they hit the ER.”

Danielle Daugherty was hired in January as the Indiana Healthy Community Coordinator to lead the charge for Hancock County. She admits that the unknowns are “daunting.”

“What we are doing is proactive in the approach and reaching out through other non-profits that serve these at-risk populations,” she notes.

“This idea of a healthy community – we’re going to be the No. 1 healthiest county in the state of Indiana. People are starting to perk up and listen to that.”

Some of the county’s short-term goals include developing a community database for local healthy events and opportunities; promoting existing community facilities; and mapping out walking and biking trails. Long-term goals include encouraging strong community partnerships and developing broad healthy community guidelines for a number of topic areas.

City buy-in

Greenfield Mayor Chuck Fewell is in his first elected term (he was tapped in 2013 to replace the previous mayor who died while in office). He says his administration’s goals are aligned with a healthy community.

“We got involved (in IHCI) because we want to be vibrant and want the community to be vibrant. A healthy community is a productive, healthy atmosphere and attractive for economic

development. Healthy businesses want to locate where a community is healthy,” he states.

Connecting trails and getting people moving downtown are among Fewell’s goals. Another is promoting healthy environments through downtown revitalization on Main Street.

“That’s where the city comes in to be a partner. You have to start with the city having a buy-in to express to the schools, to the businesses, to the private enterprise. The city does buy in to it and we are a part of it,” he attests.

Going the distance

One of Daugherty’s main objectives is to get businesses signed up to participate in the AchieveWELL process, which recognizes employer workplace wellness programs at a statewide level. Spreading the word is the next step.

Long admits he hadn’t been aware of the WCI (a program of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce) or the initiative prior to meeting with Gillespie.

“We had been looking at a way to do this for several months,” he offers. “Chuck sat down with me and I said, ‘How do you make something like this happen?’ And they appear to have the roadmap,” he shares. “I’m a very competitive person, and knowing that there was not a No. 1 yet and that’s still up for grabs. That is cool.”

Daugherty also believes that connecting with the WCI has enabled her to get the message out about Hancock County.

“People are really starting to take it that Hancock County means business. We’ve been invited to some big conversations, about how do we create this blueprint of a healthy community,” she notes.

“If I were a business, I would take a serious look at what’s going on out here. Movements don’t just happen. If I were a start-up thinking about how can I become part of a community that embraces change or ingenuity, I’d take some notice of what’s happening out here.”

Gillespie acknowledges that desire for communities to make a name as a healthy destination.

“You look at: What do these counties want? They want to be seen as a place, a destination place for people to move to,” he conveys.

“And what we’re trying to do is help them with that path. We want to be their guide, advisor and evaluator.”

RESOURCES: Danielle Daugherty and Steve Long, Hancock Regional Hospital, at www.hancockregionalhospital.org | Chuck Fewell, city of Greenfield, at www.greenfieldin.org | Chuck Gillespie and the Indiana Healthy Community Initiative, Wellness Council of Indiana, at www.wellnessindiana.org