

An ounce of prevention

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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Recently, the Center for Rural Affairs in Lyon, Neb., released a new report that looks at how rural individuals and families will benefit from provisions in the Affordable Care Act that focus on public health and prevention.

Entitled, Prevention and Public Health, the report examines priorities of the Affordable Care Act that seek to change the health care system by placing a greater emphasis on health and disease prevention as well as by promoting strategies that will help create healthier people and healthier communities.

In other words, says Jon Bailey, author of the report, these provisions seek to turn the current sick care system into a true health care system.

Given the rural disparities in the current system, rural people and communities have much to gain from an emphasis on health and prevention.

The report can be viewed and downloaded at:
<http://files.cfra.org/pdf/prevention-and-public-health.pdf>.

“The prevention and public health provisions of the Affordable Care Act have been seriously overlooked in the discussion of the law,” commented Bailey, report author and Director of Rural Research at the Center for Rural Affairs. “These are among the most important provisions of the law, particularly for rural people and communities. If the health care system is truly to be reformed and costs lowered, Americans simply have to become healthier.”

According to the report, chronic diseases and conditions such as heart disease, cancer, stroke and diabetes are responsible for seven of ten American deaths each year and 75 percent of the nation’s health spending. Rural residents experience these diseases and conditions or the circumstances that lead to them in generally greater numbers. Many behaviors lead to poor health and the aforementioned chronic conditions - behaviors such as tobacco use, poor diet, physical inactivity and alcohol abuse. And rural residents have greater rates of engaging in these behaviors. Generally this is caused by unhealthy lifestyles due to lack of access to healthy food (e.g. food desserts) and less physical activity due to lack of facilities such as gyms,

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recreational areas and biking/hiking trails.

“For rural America to reverse these health care trends and become healthier a true team effort will be required,” concluded Bailey. “Congress will have to appropriate funds for programs and resources authorized in the Affordable Care Act, the administration and relevant agencies will have to implement the Affordable Care Act programs in ways that include and benefit rural areas and rural people.”

Bailey went on to explain that rural communities, officials and providers will have to take advantage of programs and resources available to them, and rural individuals and families will have to take responsibility to live healthier.

Some of the recent research analyzed in Bailey’s report shows that increased public health spending, such as that included in the Affordable Care Act, will reduce mortality rates for the most common causes of preventable deaths. According to the report, a ten percent increase in public health spending will result in reduced mortality rates of as much as seven percent for infant deaths, heart disease, diabetes and cancer.

Other findings regarding public health investments are as follows:

- Public health investments can “produce measurable improvements in health, especially in low-resource communities,” which would include many rural communities;
- Public health investments may exceed the effects of similar expansions in local medical care resources. This is important for rural communities where a critical shortage of health care professionals needs addressing, but is likely to be a more difficult and longer-term solution than enhancing public health resources;
- More education and an enhanced emphasis on risky behaviors and unhealthy lifestyle choices can help reverse them and make rural people more healthy;

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- Research suggests that improved access and reduced cost-sharing for preventive services under the law will increase their use, and that people who previously had to pay out of pocket - and thus did not obtain the services they should have - will benefit most;

- Enhanced resources for public health activities will help increase access to preventive tests, screenings and procedures - another area where rural residents have lagged behind the nation.

This is the 14th report in a series dealing with how health care reform and the Affordable Care Act will impact rural America. Visit <http://www.cfra.org/policy/health-care/research> to review or download earlier Center for Rural Affairs health care reports.

The Center for Rural Affairs was established in 1973 as an unaffiliated nonprofit corporation under IRS code 501(c)3. The Center for Rural Affairs was formed by rural Nebraskans concerned about family farms and rural communities, and we work to strengthen small businesses, family farms and ranches, and rural communities.