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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Health Officers Association Presents Results of Countywide Health Survey

Somerset County residents have better access to doctors than the average New Jerseyan but they still need to work on reducing their risk of illness from obesity, smoking and high blood pressure.

Those are among the conclusions from the first countywide Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS) conducted in Somerset County this year under the auspices of the Somerset County Health Officers Association, in cooperation with the Community Public Health Partnership, the Somerset County Governmental Public Health Partnership, the Somerset County United Way and other community partners.

The Health Officers Association announced the findings at its annual meeting on Oct. 24 in Somerville. The group also presented its President's Award to Freeholder Peter S. Palmer, county health liaison, for his ongoing support of public health education and initiatives in Somerset County.

From May through the end of August, adult residents of Somerset County were asked to "Answer the Call for Health" by participating in the confidential telephone health survey conducted by Holleran Consulting of Lancaster, Pa., specialists in community health research. The Somerset County United Way provided a \$10,000 grant toward the cost of the survey.

"Somerset County United Way was excited about the opportunity to partner with the Somerset County Health Department, local Health Officers Association and the Women's Health & Counseling Center on this countywide health survey," said Somerset County United Way CEO and President John Graf, Jr. "The results of the survey will certainly play a major role in our United Way's Community Impact initiative, assisting us in getting to the root of the problems many of our residents are facing here in Somerset County."

The random phone survey of 2,019 adult county residents, conducted in both English and Spanish, included questions related to eating habits, cholesterol, diabetes, heart disease and other health concerns. The calculated response rate for the study, based on the number of completed interviews divided by the number of eligible respondents, is 28.2 percent.

Survey Results

The results showed that Somerset County residents fare better, or healthier, than the State of New Jersey and the United States as a whole in a number of areas.

Compared to the state and the nation, more county residents reported being in "excellent" general health; reported "no days" of poor mental or physical health in the preceding month; said they have health care coverage; had had a flu shot during the previous year; and were more likely to be trying to lose weight by eating fewer calories and less fat, and exercising.

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Somerset County residents are more likely than folks in New Jersey and the U.S. to have had their blood cholesterol checked within the previous year, and are less likely to have high cholesterol.

On the downside, survey respondents were more likely than others in New Jersey to be overweight according to their Body Mass Index statistics. However, Somerset County residents are not significantly different from the national trend in this area.

Compared to the state and the nation, adults in Somerset County also were more likely to have high blood pressure; less likely to have quit smoking in the previous year; and more likely to have consumed alcohol in the previous month, but in lesser quantities than statewide and nationally.

Compared to the rest of the nation alone, Somerset County residents are more likely to have visited the dentist in the previous year.

"By collecting a 'snapshot' of the health status and health-related behaviors of our residents, we can better identify where to target our public health education efforts," said Health Officers Association President Steve Krajewski, who serves as health officer in Somerville, Manville and Raritan.

The survey also asked about behaviors that contribute to poor health, such as smoking and inactivity. "This will help service providers and local municipalities to better target their health-education efforts with their limited public-health resources," he added.

Community Partnership

Funding for the initiative came from members of the Community Public Health Partnership, including the United Way of Somerset County, the Somerset County Health Department through a grant from the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, the Somerset County Health Officers Association, the Rocky Hill Health Department, the Middle-Brook Regional Health Commission and the Women's Health and Counseling Center.

This BRFSS was based on one developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the nation's lead public-health entity.

"The Somerset County BRFS Survey was a terrific example of effective intergovernmental cooperation between the municipal health officers and the county Health Department," said Somerset County Health Officer John Horensky.

Freeholder Palmer noted that similar surveys have been done nationally and statewide for a number of years. "However, in hiring Holleran Consultants to interview our own Somerset County residents, the Health Officers Association has had the opportunity to obtain data that pertains specifically to our own county's population," he said.

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