

Hospitals aim to curb local health disparities

Survey reveals high rates of heart disease, cancer in region

By **CHRISTIN NANCE LAZERUS**
Post-Tribune

Lake County has three times the number of homicides per capita than the national average. Deaths due to heart disease and cancer also are higher than average — and they impact the black community even more so. Many residents find it difficult to access health care due to barriers, such as cost and transportation.

The statistics in the 2013 Community Health Needs Assessment are sobering but are serving as motivation to local health care providers to develop initiatives to tackle those problems head on. More than 1,120 participants completed surveys at Methodist Hospitals Northlake, Community's St. Catherine, and Franciscan's St. Margaret.

The top areas eyed for improvement include access to health services; heart disease death rates; cancer death rates; nutrition, physical activity and weight status; diabetes; injury and violence prevention; and family planning/maternal and child health.

Methodist intern Briana Kikalos presented a wealth of data on the health of Northwest Indiana at a recent meeting, which demonstrated disparities among race and ethnic groups, age and gender.

■ Health access: About 88 percent

of non-Hispanic whites in the survey reported being insured, compared to 75 percent of the Hispanic and black populations.

■ Heart disease: It's the leading cause of death nationally and in Lake County. Almost twice as many men die from heart disease compared with women. Locally, black residents die from heart disease at a rate of 117.6 per 1,000 deaths, compared with 96.3 non-Hispanic whites and 62.8 Latinos.

■ Cancer: Non-skin cancers like breast, prostate and lung cancer, are higher in Lake County than the national average. The cancer rate is higher than the national average, and black men are nearly three times more likely to be diagnosed with prostate cancer than white men.

Representatives from Methodist Hospitals, Community Healthcare System, Franciscan Alliance, and the Lake County Nurse-Family Partnership recently detailed some of the programs underway at the Northwest Indiana Health Disparities Luncheon at Avalon Manor in Merrillville.

Denise Dillard, coordinating council member and vice president of external and governmental affairs for Methodist Hospitals, said the effort to measure and change the health outcomes in Northwest Indiana has grown since it started eight years ago.

"Every hospital is approached as an anchor to see what do you intend to do to make your city healthy," she said.

Talking about the mental health needs of a community has been

the focus of St. Catherine Hospital in East Chicago. Craig Bolda, chief operating officer of St. Catherine Hospital, said a 2012 study of 500 residents revealed some of the same issues, such as obesity and heart disease. Bolda said the hospital set out to inform the community of the resources out there, but there was a lack of adequate resources for the mental health component.

In response, the hospital established a behavioral health intensive outpatient program for adults who are experiencing behavioral or emotional difficulties. The program lasts four to six weeks and includes group therapy sessions which focus on improving coping skills, establishing safety and enhancing self-respect.

"We're looking at the integrated primary care model because studies have shown the chronic conditions that we all hear about, the obesity, the diabetes, etc., can have more favorable outcomes when you address the mental component," Bolda said. "I believe the words anxiety and depression should be talked about just as much as hypertension and diabetes."

Connie Adams, a cardiovascular clinical nurse specialist at Methodist Hospitals, said one in three people will die from complications due to heart disease, so it's necessary to educate the public about the risk factors and preventive steps and provide health screenings.

Adams urged people to know their blood pressure and chole-

"Every hospital is approached as an anchor to see what do you intend to do to make your city healthy."

—Denise Dillard, coordinating council member and vice president of external and governmental affairs for Methodist Hospitals

sterol numbers in order to empower patients to talk with their doctors if treatment is needed. Risk factors include cigarette smoking, uncontrolled diabetes, poor diet, lack of physical activity, obesity and stress. Methodist holds health and wellness screenings, visiting fitness centers, nursing homes and talking with kids at schools about healthy habits.

For people who are uninsured, sometimes providers have to go where they are, said Julie Mallers, nurse practitioner and director of the St. Clare Clinic in Crown Point. The clinic, which is part of Franciscan Alliance, worked with local churches, food pantries and other organizations to set up sites to screen people for blood pressure and blood sugar. After screening more than 800 people, Mallers and her staff developed a program to assist those with health care access issues, including assisting them in getting enrolled in the Healthy Indiana Plan 2.0 or Medicaid, and having them meet with a nurse navigator, who serves as a lifestyle coach.

"We held lunch and learns at a food pantry to help them make a heart healthy lunch and dinner at home," Mallers said. "We put

ourselves out there and had a great response."

Gun violence is an epidemic that Dr. Michael McGee, chief medical director at Methodist Hospitals Emergency Services, witnesses daily.

"It's out of control," McGee said. "It's not just a Gary thing; it's all over Northwest Indiana. People are coming to us as a trauma center and we're overwhelmed."

Methodist Northlake is a Level III "In the Process" trauma center, and it is required to develop prevention programs addressing the major source of trauma cases locally. McGee helped found the POP (Project Outreach and Prevention) on Violence Foundation to help local teens. "The teenagers are dying; they should not be dying," McGee said. "We can have an impact on these kids."

McGee presents motivational talks on topics such as avoiding drugs and violence, bullying, domestic abuse and conflict resolution. The foundation also has a health professions enrichment program, which aims to increase minority participation in health careers.