‘Healthy Together:’ a Community Partnership to Improve Health

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Public health and the health-care industry are like zebras and horses: we have plenty in common, but we also have some fundamental differences.

When you think of health, you most likely think about it in personal terms: going to the doctor, taking your medicine, exercising regularly, eating healthy foods, and brushing and flossing your teeth.

Ideally, you have a health-care provider who partners with you to diagnose and treat your diseases and injuries and advises you on how to improve and protect your health.

Public health, on the other hand, has always focused on the health of whole communities. We strive to improve things like air quality, food safety, and opportunities for physical activity. Our patient, if you will, is no one individual. It’s the entire public we serve. And we recognize that, if we’re to move the dial on how healthy this community is, we need to partner with the public to do so.

That’s why Lewis and Clark Public Health reached out last fall to other organizations in the community to form a group called Healthy Together. Its purpose will be to “work strategically, comprehensively, and collectively toward improving the health of all Lewis and Clark County residents.”

So far, we’ve formed a steering committee made up of decision-makers from the health department, St. Peter’s Health, PureView Health Center, United Way of the Lewis and Clark Area, and the Rocky Mountain Development Council. These individuals have been meeting regularly to design a process that we hope will lead to a collaborative effort to improve health outcomes for all.

This fall, we plan to expand community involvement and invite representatives of other sectors – nonprofit groups, faith institutions, law enforcement, schools, elected officials, businesses, and others – to be part of a task force that will spend the next year developing a three-year strategic plan to address our most pressing health concerns.

We also plan to broaden our perspective beyond the Helena area. We hope to hold listening sessions in East Helena, Lincoln, and Augusta to learn what their unique needs are, too.
Bolstered by these different perspectives and areas of expertise – and armed with data on our current state of health locally – Healthy Together will identify:

- this county’s most pressing health problems, and
- strategies and resources that we can use, working together, to address those needs. There will be roles and responsibilities for all.

Healthy Together will monitor and record progress on health improvement in our county every year. Every three years, the partnership will produce a report to the public on its work.

This “community health improvement planning” process is an opportunity to develop a common agenda for the entire community. It will help everyone to focus energy and resources and support policies, systems, projects, and programs that will be most effective in improving the health of Lewis and Clark County residents.

We believe that, if we can wield our combined weight to push together in the same direction, we can move farther and faster down the road to better health. We call that “collective impact.”

If this sounds familiar, that’s because, over the past seven years, we’ve worked together with the community to produce two Community Health Improvement Plans, in 2013 and 2016. Both times, mental health and substance abuse rose to the top as the issues of greatest concern among community members. Both times, the community made some strides toward addressing these complex issues.

So how will it be different this time? The primary difference will be that the community health improvement process will not “belong” to any one organization. The steering committee expects the community to take ownership and lead the work of Healthy Together.

If you’d like to learn more about this initiative, visit the health department website at www.LewisAndClarkHealth.org and click on the Healthy Together icon on the left.

If you or your organization would like to be involved, please contact us at publichealth@lccountymt.gov.

When it comes to improving and protecting health, the more the merrier!