

Needs assessment project meets in Chester

M. Kate West
Chester Editor
chesternews@plumasnews.com

The Plumas County Public Health Agency and the Sierra Institute for Community and Environment traveled to Chester in early December to solicit public feedback on perceived health issues within the Lake Almanor Basin.

"What we are doing here is a health assessment with community plans and working with the hospitals in every district," said Sierra Institute Executive Director Jonathan Kusel.

He said the assessment and health plan project was about a "community approach to health improvement."

"The project involves gathering information and data about all of our communities and the final improvement plans for each community will go to the local hospitals where they will then be submitted to the government under Affordable Health Care Plan mandate," he added.

Project components

Kusel next explained the different components involved in the assessment and plan project.

He said the purpose of the identified components was to make the entire process a collaborative project.

Stated goals of the project are to:

- Mobilize the community.
- Develop priorities.
- Gather resources.
- Plan to improve health.

"We want to know what are the most important things," he said.

He defined the Community Improvement Plan as a long-term effort to address issues from broad participation in the community health assessment process.

He next described the community health needs assessment as "taking into account

input from persons who represent the broad interest of the community served by hospital facility including those with special knowledge."

"The project can be mobilized for action through planning and partnerships that give us a snapshot of the health status of our communities," Kusel said.

Mobilizing for action through planning and partnerships

He said the final product would provide for a healthier community with a better quality of life.

"Health priorities will be based on community needs and provide direction to public agencies in allocating resources," he said. "Coordinating the allocation of public and private health resources in the county will make for a stronger health system infrastructure."

Engaging the community

Leading off this segment, Mimi Hall asked three questions: How do you perceive the quality of life in our communities and how can it be improved? What values are important for a healthy Plumas County? And, what is a healthy Plumas County? "How do you feel about your community? How do you feel about the health status?" Hall asked.

She said she was interested in hearing the community's response to the questions and said, "As we travel to each community, we document your questions and concerns from each of the town hall meetings."

She told guests she wanted them to think about Plumas County and then think of their ideal vision of what we would look like five or 10 years in the future.

"Do you see a strong health care system?" she asked.

Public comment

In response to the questions, community members touched on a wide range of topics ranging from clean water, teen alcohol and drug abuse, the economy, youth education, the out stationing county services and childhood obesity.

A healthy private sector appeared to be the No. 1 issue to resonate with the guests.

Comments suggested more efforts needs to be made in the areas of jobs appropriation, attracting talent and the leveraging of public, private and community resources.

Volunteerism was also addressed in the form of providing incentives for seasonal residents to support and/or contribute to a community needs.

Prattville business owner Carol Franchetti asked, "What can we do to get local people health care insurance?"

She said it has long been a goal of hers to get together with other businesses to offer employees health insurance.

"There should be a program to allow small businesses to provide employees health care," she added.

Peninsula resident Aaron Seandel stated the need for "economic resources for education and transportation."

"It seems to me as we look at this we ought to be identifying what makes successful communities," he said.

It as also suggested that a system needed to be in place that offered a different way of dealing with families, one where issues of family health are readily available.

Questions were raised as to the best way to help families survive in Chester and what values are important for a healthy Plumas County.

Identified assets included well-grounded community resource centers, caring

people and reducing the community disparity divided by income.

Residents described a healthy Plumas County as having a strong hospital infrastructure, a strong health care workforce and nonalcoholic activities.

There was an overall consensus that "healthy communities have activities for children."

Fitting both the categories of obesity and economics suggestions included more winter activities to impact sedentary children and adults and something to keep the summer thrive going.

Federal mandates

Kusel said Plumas County district hospital boards are supporting the community assessment process because it feeds into a need they have.

This need, for nonprofit hospitals, is more fully defined as "additional requirements" in Section 9007 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010.

Under this act, the failure of nonprofit hospitals to meet the community health needs assessment mandate at least once every three years has the end result of a penalty to the organization of up to \$50,000 and possible jeopardy to the facility's Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c)(3) status.

This act also requires hospital facilities to adopt, implement and widely publicize their written financial assistance and emergency medical treatment policy.

Other requirements set billing limitations and hospital charges for people eligible for assistance under the policy. The act is quite specific that hospitals may not use chargemaster rates when billing assistance policy qualified patients. Instead rates must be generally no more than the three

best-negotiated commercial or Medicare rates that would be charged to individuals who have insurance covering such care.

Other requirements listed under this act address billing and collection, reporting and disclosure and governmental reports.

Local partners

Agencies driving the community assessment process forward include the Seneca Healthcare District, Plumas District Hospital, Eastern Plumas District Hospital, the Plumas County Public Health Agency, the Greenville Rancheria and the Sierra Institute for Community and Environment.

This group of medical professionals and consultants has framed their effort under the umbrella of the Northern Sierra Collaborative Health Network.

Kusel said the group was formed to create a local coalition that would take on the task of addressing health concerns by formulating community health improvement plans.

The ultimate goal of the community assessment project and the collaborative is to improve health in Plumas County communities.

Funding the process

The Public Health Agency was one of 12 health departments across the nation to receive a \$35,000 grant to initiate and complete community health improvement plans.

The grant was awarded July 25 by the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) and is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Hall said, "NACCHO is looking at us as a rural health model."

Summarized benefits to be derived from the funding and

outreach process include hospitals meeting their mandates for community assessments and improvement plans. Working through the process will also earn the Public Health Agency two of the three requirements for national health accreditation, which is likely to be the next step to ensure public health agencies operate more systematic, consistent and standardized programs.

Following local community meetings, further community input and questions can be submitted to Mimi Hall at mimi.hall@countyofplumas.com.

Questions or comments can also be addressed to Jonathan Kusel at jkusel@sierrainstitute.

General information about the purpose of the process is available at the NACCHO website: nacho/chachip.org.

Community assessment timeline

August – November 2011

Launch the project
Choose models/framework
Develop community partners

November 2011 – June 2012

Conduct assessments
Host Listening Session No. 1
Data gathering
Discussion of findings
Report findings

June – October 2012

Develop the Improvement Plan
Prioritize issues
Develop action outcomes and responsible parties
Host Listening Session No. 2

October – December 2012

Create the Implementation Plan
Disseminate plan
Develop tracking tools and evaluate
Begin implementation