

## County Health Rankings: How community data can drive system change

The [2017 County Health Rankings](#)—a collaboration between the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) and



the [University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute](#)—were released on March 29, 2017. A discussion of the new *Rankings* was held at the Kansas Health Institute (KHI) Learning Center on April 13. This year marks the ninth year

that [KHI has supported the release of the County Health Rankings](#), which have grown to play a significant role in how Kansas counties think about their health and its contributing factors. This annual release provides a unique opportunity to engage stakeholders around the state in a conversation about improving the health of Kansans. Recently, KHI convened a group of Kansas leaders from health care and public health to discuss the role of community data in system change.

**What shapes our health?** — was the main focus of the opening [presentation](#) from Gianfranco Pezzino, M.D., M.P.H., KHI senior fellow and strategy team leader. Dr. Pezzino's presentation emphasized how our understanding of what makes us healthy has evolved over time.

The presentation also discussed how *County Health Rankings* can help start community conversations about how to use data to improve health.

*“For many years, we have understood how our behaviors influence how healthy or sick we are [...] More recently, we have begun to realize how our behavior is influenced by the conditions in which we live and work.”*

– Gianfranco Pezzino, M.D., M.P.H.,  
Kansas Health Institute

**Where we live matters.** Generally, income is a strong predictor of health. The more money you have, the longer you are likely to live. People with low incomes are more likely to live in areas with poor physical environments such as unsafe housing and a lack of access to nutritious foods. These and other conditions may lead to poor health.

**Cross-sectoral work is key for improving health.** Health is strongly predicted by factors such as income and education, among others. Life expectancy increases with each additional level of education achieved. Thus, improving population health will also depend on improving the overall education level of Kansans. The public health and health care sectors cannot achieve this goal alone, as policies and systems that shape health are beyond their sphere of influence. Progress in this direction will require coordinated efforts among various stakeholders working in multiple sectors.

*“If we’re going to solve the health cost dilemma, it is not going to be health plans alone, it is not going to be providers alone. We have to collaborate.”*

– Michael Atwood, M.D.,  
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas

**Health is more than health care.** The United States spends more on health care than other high-income countries, but experiences lower life expectancy and worse health outcomes. In 2011, the U.S. spent more per capita on health care than any other nation, but despite this, there are 30 nations with greater life expectancy than the U.S. This raises the question, how can investments in health be made more effectively?

*“As we shift to a population health organization, we’re working closely with our health care and community partners to transition from sick and episodic care to treating the whole person—and more broadly, the health of an entire community.”*

– Tracy O’Rourke, M.B.A., M.H.A.,  
Stormont Vail Health



## The Intersection of Health Care and Population Health

Following Dr. Pezzino’s keynote, Robert St. Peter, M.D., KHI President and CEO, facilitated a panel discussion with Michael Atwood, M.D., Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas, Tracy O’Rourke, M.B.A., M.H.A., Stormont Vail Health, Dan Partridge, M.P.H., R.S., Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department, and Jon Rosell, Ph.D., Kansas Medical Society. The panel discussion provided several perspectives on the intersection of health care and population health. Several themes emerged from this dialogue. The first theme was that hospitals, insurers, health care providers and health departments must evolve.

**“We can’t treat our way out of the chronic disease epidemic.”**

– Jon Rosell, Ph.D., Kansas Medical Society

Hospitals, for example, are now encouraged not only to serve the patients that walk through their doors, but also to improve the health of everyone living in their communities. Similarly, insurers and health care providers have started to focus more on value-based care, rather than volume-based care. Value-based care is when doctors and hospitals get paid for helping people maintain or regain health, whereas volume-based care is when health care providers are paid for the number of clinical services they provide. These transformational changes require challenging basic assumptions and creating a culture that promotes new thinking, collaboration and use of data.

## Looking Ahead

Going forward, there is a need to continue to advance these conversations, including asking key questions:

*What are the opportunities for health insurance companies, physicians, hospitals, health departments and their partners to address factors in which we live, work and play? What are the challenges?*

*How can hospitals transform and become population health centers or health systems?*

*How can health care providers use population health data or County Health Rankings in their work?*

*How can different sectors share, analyze and use data to improve community health?*



The County Health Rankings provide one opportunity to draw attention to factors that shape health and engage communities. Kim Moore, president of United Methodist Health Ministry Fund, wrapped up the event by sharing some of the key takeaways from the day. Most specifically, he noted that, **“data makes us focus,”** meaning that data can provide stakeholders with the ability to use facts to begin to mobilize change.

**“The value of the Rankings is what we choose to make of it. We choose to make it an opportunity to talk about health with our community.”**

– Dan Partridge, M.P.H., R.S., Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department

### KANSAS HEALTH INSTITUTE

The Kansas Health Institute delivers credible information and research enabling policy leaders to make informed health policy decisions that enhance their effectiveness as champions for a healthier Kansas. The Kansas Health Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan health policy and research organization based in Topeka that was established in 1995 with a multiyear grant from the Kansas Health Foundation.

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212 SW 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue | Suite 300  
Topeka, Kansas | 66603-3936

785.233.5443

khi.org

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