

# County's health care falls short

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Published Oct. 19, 2006 in the STAR-BANNER

OCALA - When it comes to its health care profile, Marion County sits slightly below the state average, according to the WellFlorida Council, a research and analysis group.

The county lags behind the state average in maternal and infant health, has a higher percentage of uninsured non-elderly individuals, and is a medically underserved area for the low-income population.

Jeff Feller, director of community initiatives at WellFlorida, drew a picture of Marion County's current health care status by talking numbers and statistics, pie charts and graphs, during the weekly meeting of Public Policy Institute of Marion County on Wednesday.

But numbers hardly explain anything.

"We need to understand why we are where we are now," said Dyer Michell, the PPI chairman. "Why are we worse than some other areas in the state and the nation?"

So, for an in-depth look into the root of the county's health care issues, the WellFlorida Council will conduct a free, comprehensive needs assessment, starting early next year.

"We'll look into racial and ethnic disparities, insurance, maternal-child health and other topics," Feller said.

The information might help explain why:

- Marion County is short on primary health, dental and mental health professionals who serve low-income individuals, according to federal standards.
- Roughly 20 percent of the county's residents below age 65 - approximately 46,000 people - had no form of health insurance in 2005.
- Nearly 70 percent of all uninsured people belong to families with either one or two members working full time.
- Nearly one out of every three residents in the county was either a Medicaid recipient or uninsured in 2005.
- Between 2000 and 2005, the county's total population grew 18 percent. Meanwhile, its Medicaid and uninsured population grew nearly 28 percent.
- The county has a higher death rate than the state average.

"And I don't have an answer why. We're just talking about numbers here, so we have to take look into it," said Feller, whose organization compiled the statistics.

The study will be compiled by master's level students who will collect data and information through interviews, surveys and focus groups during a three- to four-month period.

It has been more than a decade since the county has evaluated its health care needs.

The needs assessments conducted by WellFlorida in Hernando County led to establishment of a federally qualified health center, which serves low-income, uninsured and underinsured individuals and families. It also led to several grassroots preventive initiatives.

Feller was optimistic that the study will help Marion County better understand its shortcomings in health care and make the necessary changes.

"We've got a job to do to make things happen here," said PPI member Drexel Collins, who is the SHINE (Serving Health Insurance Needs of Elderly) area coordinator for Marion and Citrus counties.

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