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13 hrs ago

## Officials dig deep to find root cause of county's low rank in health outcomes

Officials dig deep to find root cause

By JOE VACCARELLI

### Mesa County vs. state in health rankings

#### Health outcomes

*Rankings in health outcomes represent how healthy counties are within the state. The ranks are based on two types of measures: how long people live and how healthy people feel while alive.*

1. Douglas County
2. Boulder County
3. Broomfield County
4. Eagle County
5. San Miguel County
6. Larimer County
7. Pitkin County
8. Jefferson County
9. Summit County
10. Routt County
33. Mesa County

#### Health factors, measure ranks

*Rankings in health factors represent what influences the health of a county. They are an estimate of the future health of counties compared to other counties within a state. The ranks are based on four types of measures: health behaviors, clinical care, social and economic, and physical environment factors. At right is where Mesa County ranks in each category out of 58 ranked counties.*

- |                      |                             |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Douglas County    | <b>Health behaviors</b>     |
| 2. Pitkin County     | <b>51/58</b>                |
| 3. Routt County      |                             |
| 4. Broomfield County | <b>Clinical care</b>        |
| 5. Boulder County    | <b>12/58</b>                |
| 6. Summit County     |                             |
| 7. Eagle County      | <b>Social, economics</b>    |
| 8. Ouray County      | <b>50/58</b>                |
| 9. Chaffee County    |                             |
| 10. Elbert County    | <b>Physical environment</b> |
| 46. Mesa County      | <b>45/58</b>                |

Source: County Health Rankings and Roadmaps

ROBERT McLEAN/The Daily Sentinel

Mesa County ranks in the bottom half of the state for health outcomes and health factors, according to a national study released earlier this month that compares the counties in each state.

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But rather than seek grant money to battle smoking or obesity, Mesa County Public Health Executive Director Jeff Kuhr said his organization is focused on looking at the root cause of health issues and tackling them at their core.

"Our efforts are not in program areas, but more to building a community," Kuhr said. "A lot of health departments would be happy to chase a grant to fight obesity, but I don't need to educate on that when there are far greater issues to worry about."

The study, conducted for the ninth consecutive year by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, slated Mesa County 33rd in health outcomes and 46th in health factors among the 58 counties ranked in the study.

Health outcomes are based on quality and length of life. Health factor rankings analyzed behaviors, clinical care, physical environment and social and economic factors.

Douglas County on the Front Range was ranked as the healthiest, while Costilla County near the state's southern border was the unhealthiest. Garfield County came in 13th in health outcomes and 27th in health factors, Montrose County is 27th in health outcomes and 33rd in health factors and Delta County is 41st in health outcomes and 44th in health factors. The study is available at [countyhealthrankings.org](http://countyhealthrankings.org).

In 2017, Mesa County came in 25th in health outcomes and 42nd in health factors. While the county slipped in 2018, Kuhr said the county's numbers didn't change much, and even improved in some areas, as he noted the uninsured rate dropped to 11 percent. He attributed the dip to other counties around the state seeing more improvement.

Child poverty is another area that stuck out to Kuhr, as Mesa County saw little to no change while the state decreased overall.

"Really Mesa County is staying stagnant in those areas and the rest of the state is doing better," Kuhr said.

He also noted an increase in sexually transmitted disease infections because of an increased surveillance system. The county was dinged in the report for seeing an uptick in STD infections, but the county has actually improved identification in this area. The county also

typically does well in clinical care, thanks to the health care facilities in the Grand Junction area.

Overall, Kuhr believes the county's rankings are a symptom of social and economic factors, as the county's median income is typically \$12,000 to \$15,000 less than the state as a whole. He said this can result in mental health issues and poor diets, which lead to more physical ailments.

In response, Mesa County Public Health has been focused on community connectivity, building a sense of neighborhood and improving access to quality child care.

Kuhr referenced a project in Clifton in which Mesa County Public Health is coordinating with law enforcement and School District 51 to study the area around Rocky Mountain Elementary School in hopes of bringing that community together and improving the overall health of its residents.

If that program is successful, it could expand to surrounding ZIP codes in that area. Kuhr is optimistic about the approach.

"When you have an economy that struggles a bit, there is a lot of stress with that. I think it's better to work with various agencies to make some improvements to some root causes than to hang up posters that encourage people to get fit," Kuhr said.

While Kuhr said he pays attention to the study each year, he believes Mesa County Public Health is on the right track with its current focus and isn't looking to adjust its tactics based on a ranking study.

"We can't just keep responding to suicides, to homelessness, to child abuse. We can respond, but really those underlying factors are the same," Kuhr said. "We're trying to work on the community as opposed to responding with programs, because it just doesn't work."