



A healthy community is everyone's business

By Sheila Clough, Monday, August 26th 2019

Creating and sustaining healthy communities is a collaborative effort that involves working together to provide opportunities for people to achieve their best health, including their physical, mental and spiritual well-being.

No single organization can improve the health of a community alone. It takes actions through partnerships such as the one between the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission and Asante Ashland Community Hospital to share the work, learn from each other, leverage resources and mobilize action.

The betterment of an entire community is a lofty goal, and through small steps it can be done.

One of the first steps is to find out what the community — and the people who live in it — needs to reach better health. As part of the Affordable Care Act of 2010, tax-exempt hospitals across the country conduct community health assessments at least every three years to learn what residents are concerned about most and what they believe is negatively impacting the health and well-being of their community.

Asante Ashland Community Hospital just wrapped up its 2019 assessment, and the key themes that emerged were fairly expected. They include substance use, affordable housing, mental health, poverty and employment, parenting and life skills, and education and workforce development.

For the 2019 assessment, Asante collaborated with other local health care organizations to identify and prioritize community health needs. Jackson and

Josephine county public health departments, hospitals, coordinated care organizations, federally qualified health centers and other organizations participated.

The assessment incorporates data from quantitative and qualitative sources. Quantitative data included research composed of several hundred telephone and email surveys, as well as numerous focus groups. The opinions of public and social health professionals, medical providers, civic and community leaders, education and law enforcement officials, and others were gathered to learn what their perceptions were of the top health concerns in their communities.

Qualitative data such as local, regional and statewide vital statistics, U.S. Census Bureau numbers and other health-related records were collected to help round out the picture of the community's health.

Once the community health needs assessment was completed, the second step for Asante and its Ashland hospital was to prioritize the identified health needs and create an implementation strategy known as a community health improvement plan, which serves as a guide for how the hospital will address the identified health needs in the coming years.

Based on results from the 2019 regional assessment, as well as a separate community health needs assessment completed in 2017 by Asante, the Ashland hospital identified access to health care services, substance abuse, mental health, heart disease and stroke, and infant health as its top five priorities.

Several of these priorities also align with goals of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, specifically overall health and well-being for people of all ages and quality education. Much of the work being done by Asante Ashland to help improve the lives of the people who live in the community goes much deeper than simply providing health care and emergency services.

Hospital leaders are spearheading a community-wide health and well-being initiative that focuses on improvements related to physical, mental and social health. The initiative brings citizens, businesses, civic and governmental agencies together to tackle issues creating barriers to individual wellness.

The hospital partners with the Ashland Police Department and On Track to operate a drug-surrender program for people with chemical dependency with the intention of reducing substance abuse in the community and to protect the health, safety and quality of life for community members.

Nearly 2,800 children in kindergarten through eighth grade attending school in the Ashland and Phoenix/Talent districts have access to health care through funding by Asante for the school nurse program.

College students — our next generation of health care providers — receive in-hospital education and training that's required for their licensure in areas such as X-ray, nursing, dietary and laboratory, at no cost to the students.

Together, through community partnerships we can develop innovative ways to improve access to health care where it's needed; offer education to help people reach their health goals; and help prepare future caregivers for their career by teaching compassion, understanding and acceptance. These are vital factors that will help support and grow a culture of peace.

Sheila Clough is CEO of Asante Ashland Community Hospital.