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**Sue Ann Says: A Healthy County Equals Healthy Women**

Women's mortality rates in almost 43 percent of American counties actually got worse during the 15 years ending in 2006. This data was recently released in March, 2013 from the UW School of Medicine and Public Health. The study, completed by Dr. David Kindig and Erica R. Cheng averaged the mortality rates over five years (1992-1996) at the beginning of the study and five years (2002-2006) at the end, and compared the two averages. This disquieting fact should make us all realize that a healthy woman does not just mean that she has access to health care. It is about socioeconomic and behavioral factors that surround our lives every day and impact our health as women.

I started Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation over fifteen years ago. I did this with the intention of helping women and families live healthy productive, happy lives. This report certainly points out that we still have lots of work to do to fulfill our mission. I have seen the impact that education can have on our health. We now have to work harder to implement the programs and practices we know work in communities across Wisconsin.

One of the benefits of working with women in Wisconsin is that I get to travel to various communities: each has their own unique personality. I have the opportunity to appreciate the magnificence of hills and lakes, the quiet solitude of forests and streams and the liveliness of diverse cultures. Of course, health is always at the forefront of my thoughts when I travel, especially the health of women in our state. In March, the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute along with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation released the **Wisconsin County Health Rankings and Roadmaps**. The Rankings offer us a snapshot into the health of Wisconsin communities, and provide us the opportunity to improve on these health issues to make Wisconsin an ideal place to live. I was able to discuss the Rankings and Roadmaps with Karen Timberlake from the UW Population Health Institute. She pointed out that, "Where we live, work and play matters to our health!"

Reviewing the Rankings, I realize that certain Wisconsin communities that provide more accessible health care for women are making a difference. Unfortunately childhood poverty rates remain unchanged with one in five children living in poverty. Smoking, obesity and excessive drinking are issues that we have yet to adequately address. The Rankings shows that people who live in counties where there are smoke-free laws have a lower percentage of people that smoke. When fewer people are smoking it reduces cases of emphysema and lung cancer in the county and in turn prevents premature death. Where families have access to gym facilities, walking paths and healthy food in grocery stores, their obesity rate is much lower

than other places that do not. So how can you use these Rankings to learn about your own county?

### **Using the Rankings**

The Wisconsin County Health Rankings and Roadmaps website can be found at <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/> Click on the map on the state of Wisconsin and you can locate your specific county to find the rankings, or view the rankings of other counties. The rankings are divided into two main areas, **Health Outcomes and Health Factors**. If you click on the tab called Additional Measures, you can locate the population demographics of that county. Some of the valuable features of the website are two sections (Roadmaps and Tools & Resources) that offer tips, suggestions and other organizations to contact for additional information.

### **What Can You Personally Do to Improve the Health of Your County?**

The Rankings and Roadmaps are an opportunity for conversations to begin in our own communities--between citizens, government, health care providers, churches, educational institutions and businesses. Challenges can be met head on and incremental steps can be selected to improve the health of the county. Leaders in your community may confer with leaders of counties that ranked higher and learn what positive practices a specific county has implemented to improve their Health Outcomes and Health Factors.

This is your call to action! It is not just up to the government or business officials to improve the health of county residents. The website highlights counties nationwide that have already taken precise measures to improve the health of their residents. For example, the city of Minneapolis and over 40 community organizations are implementing a comprehensive obesity and tobacco prevention initiative to increase physical activity, healthy eating and smoke-free living. Projects that Minneapolis has carried out include smoke free multi-unit housing, corner stores that sell healthy produce, and a culture of biking and walking.

Are these plans that you can implement in your own community? I challenge you to seek out opportunities to share what you learn from reading the Ranking and Roadmaps with friends, colleagues and church members. Meet with community leaders to develop creative ideas on how to overcome health obstacles facing your county. As mothers and caretakers, I encourage you to strive to make healthy lifestyle choices not only for yourself but for your family. Karen Timberlake acknowledged, "It will take engagement by all sectors of society, working together, to make progress on these hard problems." The Wisconsin County Health Ranking and Roadmaps is just the place to start this journey. Working together we can build a healthier Wisconsin for everyone.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

*Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, and early detection; connects individuals to health resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit [wwhf.org](http://wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*