

Health care disparities challenge Nebraska

By Rick Ruggles / World-Herald staff writer | Posted: Friday, October 16, 2015 12:15 am

A community's overall health hinges on a complex web of factors including environment, education and access to health care, a state senator said at an Omaha conference Thursday.

State Sen. Sue Crawford of Bellevue told an audience of about 120 at the University of Nebraska Medical Center that ZIP codes, public policies, family and social support and many other factors make a difference.

Crawford spoke at the two-day conference at UNMC on the "culture of health" in Nebraska. The campus was a fitting spot for the meeting because UNMC's Dr. Ali Khan, dean of public health, has declared a goal of moving Nebraska to No. 1 on America's Health Rankings, a list compiled by the United Health Foundation. Nebraska currently is No. 10 on the list, which considers immunization rates, infant mortality statistics, infectious disease numbers and many other factors. Iowa ranks 24th.

During the question-and-answer session after Crawford's speech, Dejun Su, director of UNMC's Center for Reducing Health Disparities, pointed to the glaring impact of neighborhood on health. The longevity in one northeast Omaha ZIP code is 70.6 years of age, and the longevity within a ZIP code near Lake Zorinsky in west Omaha is 82.6, he said.

"The differences are real," Crawford responded. "That, then, tells us that we can do better."

The conference, attended by nurses, dietitians, mental health practitioners, insurers and others, was organized by the Nebraska Action Coalition-Future of Nursing, Nebraska Nurses Association, Nebraska Organization of Nurse Leaders and Nebraska Assembly of Nursing Deans and Directors. The conference was also telecast to audiences in Lincoln, Kearney and Norfolk.

Crawford, a Democrat, said a study out of the University of Wisconsin estimated that access to quality health care makes up only 20 percent of the impact on a community's health. Socio-economic factors such as education and income make up 40 percent, health behaviors such as smoking, diet and exercise make up 30 percent and environment makes up 10 percent.



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State Sen. Sue Crawford of Bellevue says the Affordable Care Act's expansion of Medicaid, denied in Nebraska, could help thousands.

Income and insurance are important factors affecting access to health.

She said out-of-pocket medical spending consumes 37 percent of the income of Nebraskans living under 200 percent of the federal poverty level. It consumes only 2 percent of the income for those above 400 percent of the federal poverty level, she said.

Medicaid expansion, an element of the Affordable Care Act that Nebraska has declined to participate in, could provide health insurance to thousands of Nebraskans, she said.

Crawford, a political science professor at Creighton University, was instrumental in the passage this year in the Nebraska Legislature of a bill that gives independent practice privileges to nurse practitioners. Before, nurse practitioners had to have a collaborative relationship with a physician. Similar bills introduced in previous years had failed.

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