

Ebel: Public health empowers people to achieve their optimal health

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(Photo: Submitted photo)

The first week each April is designated as National Public Health Week. We talk about the term “public health,” but the reality is that typically most people have a limited idea of what public health is. Maybe they think of immunizations, or free clinics, or even inspecting restaurants. So much of public health’s work goes unnoticed until there is a disease outbreak or other event. So perhaps the starting point should be “What is public health?”

While the health care system provides treatment for sick individuals, the public health system looks at the health of the community and works to prevent people from getting sick or injured in the first place. Health care and public health work as partners, we regularly collaborate, and sometimes provide similar services.

Public health focuses on the prevention of communicable diseases, early detection of cancer and other chronic diseases through public awareness and screenings, providing safety net services when needed, reducing injuries and accidental deaths, monitoring disease rates and assessing the community’s health, and helping people obtain their optimal health throughout their lives.

Our health is largely determined by the environments where we live, work, and play. Poverty and poor health go hand-in-hand. Lack of access to healthy food options and the inability to get to a job location can be a result of a lack of reliable transportation and inadequate public transit. Unsafe streets or the lack of connecting sidewalks can prevent children from walking to school, accessing parks, and can increase childhood obesity rates. Low graduation rates contribute to increased poverty, higher likelihood of tobacco use, and poorer overall health outcomes.

Public health works together with local partners and policy makers to promote literacy, increase opportunities for recreation and physical activity, improve school readiness, promote improved community and transportation planning, assure safe communities, prevent disease and injury, and make sure everyone has the opportunity for good health.

Public health practitioners work in a variety of settings, the most familiar being your local health department. In Licking County, a team of 70 professionals, from disciplines ranging from nursing, dietetics and nutrition, emergency preparedness, health education, environmental health, dental care, early childhood education, epidemiology, communications, plumbing, medical billing, vital statistics, public administration, and support and customer service fields work together toward a goal of healthy people, living in healthy communities.

Public health saves money, improves our quality of life, helps children thrive, and empowers people to achieve their optimal health. This April, join me in thanking a public health professional for the important work that they do in our community.

Submitted by Licking County Health Commissioner, Joe Ebel, R.S., M.S., M.B.A.

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