Officials highlight parallel between public health, extension

Kansas has strong roots in efforts to develop healthy communities

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Officials with two of the pillars of community health in Kansas acknowledged their shared history and the importance of working together for the well-being of the state’s citizens.

“When I talk to extension professionals in the field, the word I use when referring to public health is ‘ally,’” said Elaine Johannes, the Kansas Health Foundation’s Distinguished Professor of Community Health at Kansas State University.

“Each of our organizations has our particular role, but being allies for Kansas communities is important. From extension’s point of view, being an ally with public health is especially important because public health sees things going on before we are even aware.”

Shelly Schneider, a state public health nurse specialist with the Kansas Department of Health and the Environment, said there are 100 local health departments serving 105 Kansas counties.

Local offices are supported by the Kansas Association of Local Health Departments.

Schneider said Kansas’ system of public health is de-centralized, meaning that a Board of Health (often the county commission) establishes and oversees each local health department, and decisions are made locally together. “Every (local) health department,” she said, “needs to make sure they are meeting their county’s needs.”

The span of offices across the state and local decision-making are trademarks of public health and extension. Both systems have been in existence for more than 100 years. In some circles, Kansas’ extension system is considered the first of its kind in the country; public health shares a similar standing.
“It’s kind of cool when you look back at the history of public health in Kansas and understand how it impacted the whole United States in the development of public health in other states,” Schneider said. “I’m sure extension led the way, as well.”

Schneider said she began her career in public health in a local office – a role similar to a local extension agent. Public health offers programs addressing WIC (Women, Infants, Children), air quality, nuisance violations, immunizations, maternal child health, family planning, chronic disease, pregnancy, emergency health preparedness and more.

“Public health is not only the health we all think of,” said Schneider, alluding to physical health. “It can be safe transportation, safe neighborhoods, reducing violence…”

“When I was at the local level, I always had the mindset that if it wasn’t offered in our community, and the community needed it, it was the public health department’s job to figure out how to meet the need,” she said. “We were the safety net under all of the other programming in the community. If a topic kept falling through all of those other nets, we were there to catch them.”

However, the recent pandemic, retirements and people leaving the profession have left the state’s public health system a bit short, according to Schneider.

“One of our biggest challenges right now is building the capacity to make sure we have people who want to become doctors and nurses and respiratory therapists and aides and more,” Schneider said. “Anybody who wants to participate in health is welcome. We are feeling a huge attrition and shortage across the board.”

Public health services, she added, are often taken for granted.

“When my family hears me talk about public health, they just know that people have it handled,” Schneider said. “But if we start having a decline in public health offices and work force, people are going to start feeling that, and it’s going to be a thing that nobody can take for granted anymore.”

A longer discussion with Johannes and Schneider is available on the weekly radio program, Sound Living, produced by K-State Research and Extension. More information on healthy living is also available from local extension offices in Kansas.

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Kansas Association of Local Health Departments, https://www.kalhd.org

Sound Living, https://www ksre k-state edu/news radio-network sound-living.html

K-State Research and Extension local offices, https://www ksre k-state edu/about stateandareamaps.html
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