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Changing Health Trends

New program aimed at helping Oklahomans become healthier

By Micah Holmes
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Many of Oklahoma's top health professionals will be in Ardmore to discuss the innovative Turning Point program and the health status of southern Oklahomans.

The health outlook for Oklahomans is grim. The state is 48th in the nation in premature deaths and is among the nation's worst in several categories of poor health indicators, such as smoking rates, teen-age pregnancies and child immunization rates.

"Oklahoma is just not a good place to live if you want to live a long time," said Sandy Butler, regional director for the Turning Point program. "Because on the average, we die early. It is that simple."

Funded by the Kellogg Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the program intends to change Oklahoma's negative health trends by taking a new approach to individuals' lifestyles.

"We want the people in this community to tell us what they think is the best way that we can serve them and help them to live longer and better lives," Butler said. "We want to take a different approach because, obviously, the way we were doing it wasn't working."

Dr. Leslie Beitsch, commissioner of the Oklahoma State Health Department and who will be at the meeting Monday, is excited about the new opportunities of the program

"These fundamental steps through Turning Point represent extraordinary system change for Oklahoma," Beitsch said. "Communities have an equal voice in public health decisions. Public health workers in the Oklahoma State Department of Health see their role as supportive of community-based decisions and initiatives. Perhaps, for the first time, community members see the important role they play in assuring a healthier state. We are hopeful about the future and look forward to improving state's health outcomes as we work together as partners."

According to Butler, Ardmore will be among the first communities in the state to see the impacts of the Turning Point program, but the success of the program will be dependent on how much local citizens become involved in the program.

"When it comes down to it, everyone has an interest in health issues, whether it be rising costs of health insurance, state Medicaid costs or their own personal health," Butler said. "This meeting and this program is a great chance to become involved in making Oklahoma a better place to live for everyone."

Beitsch agreed on the importance of community participation.

"Unless communities are actively engaged not only in determining their own public health needs, but also in developing an implementing solutions, improvement in community health will not be realized," Beitsch said.

The Turning Point meeting will be at 2 p.m. Monday at Mercy Memorial Health Center Conference Center, and the public is welcome to attend.