June 15, 2006 11:06 am

Coalition members discuss State of Cherokee County Health

By Josh Newton, Press Staff Writer

Many Cherokee County residents need to see a doctor, but they can't afford to. And many suffer chronic conditions, like high cholesterol and diabetes, sometimes exacerbated by obesity.

Those were among some of the findings from a study conducted by the Oklahoma State Department of Health, and presented to members of the Cherokee County Health Coalition at the group's annual meeting Tuesday.

The coalition and representatives from other county organizations discussed the state of Cherokee County Health, and ways to combat problems. Linda Axley, coalition chairwoman, thanked guests for their support of coalition programs.

"We have a lot to be proud of," said Axley, recognizing accomplishments from the past year.

Anne Bliss, with the Oklahoma State Department of Health's Chronic Disease Service, introduced a self-reported Behavioral Risk Factor Survey taken in Cherokee County.

According to the report, residents of Cherokee County were significantly more likely to report poor health than Oklahomans overall. More than 16 percent of the residents reported needing to see a doctor, but could not because of cost.

More than 25 percent of the residents surveyed currently smoke cigarettes; almost 40 percent of the residents have been told they have high cholesterol; and nearly 10 percent of residents have been diagnosed with diabetes or have been told they have pre-diabetes.

However, residents of Cherokee County were more likely to be physically active, compared to Oklahoma residents overall, according to the report.

"People are meeting physical activity goals, which is excellent," said Bliss.

Axley introduced Oklahoma Commissioner of Health Dr. Mike Crutcher, who explained what he believes everyone should understand when considering health and wellness.

"There is no absolute definition of good health," said Crutcher. "It's a relative term."

Crutcher pointed out Oklahoma's rank in the nation for 2005 – 44th – in health and wellness, a drop from 40th the previous year. Oklahoma ranks in the bottom 10 in the country for most health statistics, according to Crutcher. "Oklahoma ranks last in the nation, 50th, in cardiovascular diseases," said Crutcher, relating such statistics to the poor availability of health insurance. "Oklahoma ranks 47th in the nation for lack of health insurance."

Residents must choose to eat better and exercise more to change any of the statistics, according to Crutcher. "I don't think it's realistic to believe Oklahoma will ever be top in many of these areas because of our per-capita income," said Crutcher. "Education rates are also extremely powerful. But improvements here on out are going to come through behavior modifications."

Michelle Hale, director of the Oklahoma Governor's Tulsa Office, explained Gov. Brad Henry's Wellness Program for state employees. She described some of the initiatives the governor's office has taken the past year, including enacting laws to promote stronger wellness and to curb tobacco usage.

The governor's office began to encourage health awareness for state employees after realizing the state could be an example to its residents, and also save some taxpayer dollars.

"We wanted to encourage wellness programs where we live, work and learn," said Hale. "We knew we must get our own house in order first."

Community Health Coalition Coordinator Carol McKiel highlighted local efforts to increase health awareness and physical activity, including coalition activities; an Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality grant; the Health

Services Council and Rural Health Institute; NeoHealth; Cherokee Nation's Healthy Nation; tobacco prevention and control through Tahlequah Public Schools; Healthy Kids for a Healthy Tomorrow; Safe Kids Coalition, Walk This Weigh; and Oklahoma Turning Point Initiative.

"We are looking for more employers who would like to have support for healthy programs," said McKiel. "We can give them a free health assessment to look at the health needs of their employees."

McKiel praised the work of the community leaders and offered any support the coalition could provide in making Cherokee County a healthier place to live.

"The challenge is to get people to live healthier without trying to be perfect," said Crutcher.

Other action
The coalition also:
• Reviewed and approved minutes from April 11 meeting.
• Confirmed and electied CHC officers, including Chair Linda Axley, administrator of Cherokee County Health Department,;and Vice Chair Connie Schlittler, executive director of Bill Willis Community Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.
• Presented Cherokee County Healthy Worksite Awards to Go Ye Village and Tahlequah Public Schools.

What's next
The next Community Health Coalition meeting will be at 11 a.m. at the Porterhouse Restaurant, on Tuesday, Aug. 8.