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Cooperative public health district looks back on first year's successes

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GREENFIELD — Living with chronic disease is arguably one of the biggest challenges for residents in Franklin County — but public health and hospital officials agree there are three areas communities can address to help their neighbors live healthier lives: promote exercise, a healthy diet and smoking cessation.

Boards of health from 10 towns met October 30 at the Mohawk Park Restaurant in Charlemont, for the second annual meeting of the Cooperative Public Health Service health district.

The Cooperative Public Health Service is a regional health department serving 10 towns in Franklin County. It is dedicated to improving public health in those towns through environmental health inspections, code enforcement, education, wellness and special programs.

The 10 towns make up 20 percent of the population of Franklin County and include 6,400 households.

The Boards of Health of the towns of Buckland, Charlemont, Gill, Hawley, Heath, Leyden and Monroe share a regional Health Agent through the district. The same towns, plus Conway, Deerfield, and Shelburne, share a public health nurse.

Much of what the health boards, many of which are also boards of selectmen, do is educate the public on how to stay healthy and offer services such as flu clinics, Lyme disease tick testing, summer camp and food inspections.

Among the 10 towns, the top chronic diseases are obesity, diabetes, asthma and Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a common lung disease, according to Gina Campbell, Chief Operations Officer at Baystate Franklin Medical Center. The most prevalent cancers in the area attack the breast, pancreas and prostate.

Promoting exercise and improving nutrition among residents can help prevent chronic disease, which are usually brought on by obesity, said Rachel Stoller of the Communities That Care Coalition. Obesity is associated with five of the chronic diseases (hypertension, high cholesterol, stroke, diabetes and heart disease).

One of the most successful public health initiatives this year, they agree, was the creation of the Opioid Task Force of Franklin County and the North Quabbin Region to tackle the increase in opioid and heroin addiction afflicting the community. Since it formed in September 2013, the group has grown from 40 people at its first meeting to 70 to 100 people, drawing attention from state legislators and top DPH officials to the small county.

The Cooperative Public Health Service also did well on the front against Lyme disease. University of Massachusetts graduate intern Katelynn Venne helped administer the program to offer free tick tests for residents through a Community Innovation Grant to create the Massachusetts Tickborne Disease Network. Over

200 tests were provided.

Another successful program is the public health nurse clinics. During Fiscal Year 2014, Lisa White, a nurse for the health service, helped more than 200 residents manage their symptoms and health problems. She sees residents at four regular clinics at the Charlemont Federated Church, Conway Town Hall, Deerfield Town Office and Shelburne Falls Senior Center.

Part of White's job is to monitor all the communicable disease reports for the towns and follow up with residents to discuss health concerns and steps needed to protect others.

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