

News Release

For Immediate Release

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Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department celebrates 10 years of service

McCook- Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department is celebrating its 10th anniversary since its inception in April 2002. An open house celebration featuring several programs will be hosted August 30th at the McCook office located at 404 West 10th (1 block north of Arby's) from 11:30 am to 1:30 pm. Drawings, giveaways, and tours will also be available during the open house.

Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department is the lead agency in public health preparedness planning, follow-up for disease, influenza and school surveillance, tobacco cessation and education, and the lead coordinator of public health data.

Prior to 2001, the local public health system in Nebraska was weak, fragmented, and severely underfunded. Local public health departments covered only 22 of the state's 93 counties.

In January 2001, when the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement was issued, Nebraska's Legislature passed the Health Care Funding Act, LB 692. This legislation assures a minimum of \$50 million in interest per year in perpetuity for use in health-related activities. Local public health currently receives only 10% of the funds allocated from the Health Care Funding Act.

A minimum of 30,000 people were required to be in each of the newly formed health districts and the counties were required to be adjoining. Eight counties signed an interlocal agreement and incorporated to form Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department. The counties served are: Chase, Dundy, Frontier, Furnas, Hayes, Hitchcock, Perkins and Red Willow.

"When we formed the health department in 2002, we wanted to strengthen healthcare in general in Southwest Nebraska. This would be done by identifying and filling gaps in services." States Earl McNutt, Red Willow County commissioner and Board of Health member. Earl has been a board member since April 2002 and held the chairman position for approximately five years.

By State statute the Board of Health is comprised of one county commissioner from each of the eight counties and one public spirited minded person. Additionally, the Board must have a Medical Director and a Dentist.

"When I first joined the Board in April 2002, I was unaware of the role public health played. Having served on the Board for 12 years, I have watched my local community grow in awareness about public health and their resources, states Kevin Owens, Frontier County commissioner and Board of Health member. "West Nile Virus, Swine Flu, H1N1 influenza, are a few of the topics that public health has built public awareness around. I have seen many people quit smoking or chewing tobacco due to an

increased awareness of the dangers of tobacco. I am honored to have served on this Board since its inception.”

In December 2004, Myra Stoney, Director for SWNPHD was hired by the Board. The health department was located in one room in the courthouse in Trenton. Since then, the health department has moved twice to arrive at its current location at 404 West 10th (1 block north of Arby’s) in McCook. The health department purchased and remodeled its existing location without borrowing money. Funding for the health department consists of Master Tobacco Settlement funds, contracts, grants and services. It does not receive any county or local tax funding.

“The success of the health department is the staff and Board. The staff genuinely love their work, believe in our mission and are excited about our future. The Board is fantastic. They guide and support me through the many challenges we face daily. I am fortunate to have a great support system in my efforts to lead the health department in the many programs and services we offer.” States Myra Stoney, Director of SWNPHD.

The staffing has grown from two full time employees in 2004 to six employees in 2005 and currently employs nine staff members. The health department currently has over 20 programs to include: tobacco cessation and awareness, radon measurement, Walk to Health, FROG (Fitness Reaching Older Gen’s), Respite, bioterrorism planning and preparedness, community preparedness committees, Quit Smoking and Quit Spit kits, handwashing, adult vaccinations, Vaccines for Children, disease surveillance follow-up, West Nile Virus education and surveillance, influenza vaccinations and education, worksite wellness program, TOUCAN – teaching our youth choices – activities and nutrition, Nebraska Kids Fitness and Nutrition Day, and more.....

For more information about Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department call 308-345-4223 or stop by at 404 West 10th (1 block north of Arby’s). More information is also available at www.swhealth.ne.gov or on Facebook and Twitter. Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department serves Chase, Dundy, Frontier, Furnas, Hayes, Hitchcock, Perkins and Red Willow counties.

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