



Public Health  
Division

# County of Santa Cruz

## HEALTH SERVICES AGENCY

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### Press Release

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## HEALTH RANKINGS GIVE SNAPSHOT OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

**SANTA CRUZ COUNTY, CA** – The 2017 *County Health Rankings*, released today by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, once again rank Santa Cruz County among the healthiest in California, placing 16<sup>th</sup> among the 58 California counties for both health outcomes and health factors.

The report lauded the Santa Cruz County community's ongoing efforts to improve public health and health care throughout Santa Cruz County, and the county was highly ranked when it comes to factors such as low smoking and obesity rates, diabetes prevention and medical care. However, the report also notes areas for improvement, including affordable housing and income inequality, which can influence the overall health of the community.

*County Health Rankings* are categorized into two areas: health outcomes and health factors. Health outcomes represent how healthy the county is, whereas health factors measure what influences the health of the county. Health factors examined in the *County Health Rankings* go beyond medical care and include health behaviors, social and economic conditions and the physical environment – the Social Determinants of Health.

The report shows the county improving on many measures. With smoking the leading cause of death in the U.S. and obesity a national epidemic, Santa Cruz County's adult smoking rate fell to 11 percent (14<sup>th</sup> lowest in California) and our obesity rate to 20 percent (8<sup>th</sup> lowest). In addition, Santa Cruz County clinical care was ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in California, it has one of the lowest rates of low birthweight in the state, the number of uninsured residents dropped and there are low rates of physical inactivity and very good access to exercise opportunities.

“Santa Cruz County is a healthy community. We have healthy behaviors, access to some of the best medical care in California and our beautiful environment invites everyone to get outdoors and exercise. We are glad to see these improvements reflected in these rankings,” said Dr. Arnold Leff, Santa Cruz County Public Health Officer.

However, the *County Health Rankings* report showed Santa Cruz County's overall ranking declining from 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>, and highlighted socioeconomic factors that continue to impede positive change in overall community health. They include income inequality (46<sup>th</sup> out of 57 counties ranked), severe



housing problems (46<sup>th</sup>) and long commutes (40<sup>th</sup>). An aging population may also be contributing to an increase in the number of people who consider themselves in fair or poor health.

The Santa Cruz County Public Health Division recognizes the value in measuring health outcomes. However, in many cases the rankings are differentiated by fractions of percentiles, which means there may be no meaningful difference in health outcomes and factors in counties separated by a few spots in the rankings.

Furthermore, communities that move up in rankings through positive progress can make it appear that others have declined, even though those communities have improved their own performance. For example, Santa Cruz County appeared to “slip” on the high school graduation rates ranking, despite Department of Education data showing the county has increased graduation rates in each of the last four years.

The rankings compare more than 30 factors, and emphasize that health is not a singular effort but a combined work in progress across all community partners. The Santa Cruz County Public Health Division works in collaboration with local governments, non-profit organizations, health care facilities, business groups, schools, faith-based organizations and many other stakeholders to improve the health of all people in Santa Cruz County.

“This emphasizes that it takes a village to improve public health. We know how socioeconomic factors contribute to public health outcomes, and we need to collectively develop a joint strategy for change that will result in improved outcomes in Santa Cruz County. Health is everyone’s responsibility. We have a strong network of community partners willing to work toward that goal,” said Mary Lou Goeke, Executive Director of the United Way of Santa Cruz County.

The Public Health Division is currently working on a Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) designed to address specific opportunities for improved health identified by the community. The Division has partnered with many stakeholders to identify strategic areas to focus on over the next five years, and will collaborate regularly to track progress. The CHIP’s goal is to have an integrated whole family model targeting families with children ages 0-5 to improve Access to Care, Access to Early Childhood Education and Access to Dental. This ‘upstream’ approach will lead to better health for individuals and communities as a whole.

“The data is only as valuable as the action it inspires and the lives it improves. Rankings are an important springboard for conversations on how to expand opportunities for the entire community to be healthy. We invite everyone to be a part of the conversation,” Santa Cruz County Health Services Agency Director Giang Nguyen said.

The rankings are available at <http://www.countyhealthrankings.org>.