

Rural outreach for a healthier farming community

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Healthy farmers are vital to a healthy economy in rural Shawano County, WI. Agriculture accounts for more than 22% of the local economy and dairy farms make up the biggest part of that contribution.

But many dairy farmers find health insurance too costly – nearly 20% lack coverage and 80% lack insurance that covers checkups and preventive care. And given their long workdays, farmers are reluctant to leave the farm to visit the local doctor or clinic for a checkup, even if it were provided at a reasonable cost.

So community leaders decided that, if farmers were not going to leave the farms to get care, the county would bring care to the farmers. Area health care, agriculture and business leaders hired a rural health coordinator in 2004 to visit farm families and provide free health risk assessments, such as blood pressure, cholesterol and skin cancer screenings, as well as offer health information and referrals to area services.

Called the “Shawano County Rural Health Initiative,” the program is spearheaded by ThedaCare, a four-hospital community health system based in Appleton. For its leadership in programs like the rural health initiative, the health system was selected as a finalist for the 2008 Foster G. McGaw Prize for excellence in community service. The award is sponsored by the AHA, the Baxter International Foundation and the Cardinal Health Foundation.

The rural outreach program resulted from a 2002 ThedaCare-led “plunge” into

the county’s dairy region. Health system, community and business leaders took a bus to visit farmers and hear their problems.

ThedaCare organizes one or two of these community plunges a year, visiting different parts of the county to gauge residents’ needs. “It’s a way for us to visit with and speak to people who are living the issues,” says Paula Morgen, ThedaCare’s director of community affairs. Plunges are a first step toward bringing the community together to address issues like poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, literacy and, in this case, dairy farmers’ lack of access to health care, she says.

“Plunges are an intense kind of experience,” says Tom Anderson, who participated in the plunge to the dairy farms and is an agriculture agent with Shawano’s University of Wisconsin extension office. Anderson’s office develops educational resources and programs tailored to support Shawano’s farm community. Community plunges “move you beyond your comfort zone to where it all happens,” Anderson says. “With the farmers, it was about getting a deeper appreciation of the stress they deal with every day.”

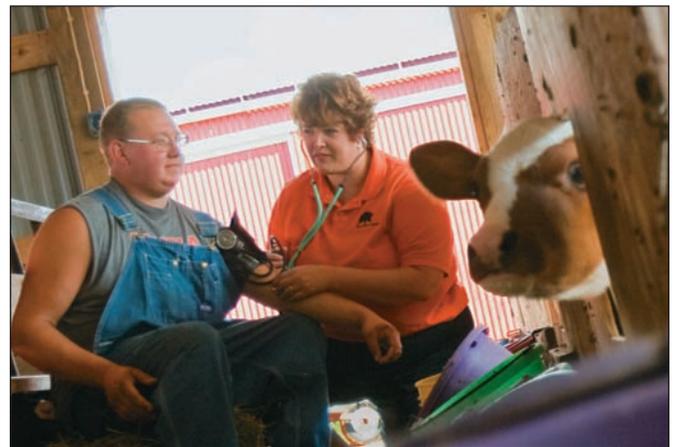
Under the outreach program, rural health coordinator Rhonda Strebel brings primary and preventive care services directly to the farmers free of charge. She or her assistant have visited more than 300 farms and make about 1,000 “farm calls” a year.

With little or no health insurance coverage, Strebel says farmers are not likely to seek

medical treatment for minor accidents or chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, melanoma, hearing problems or arthritis or seek help for bruises or broken bones. And they are not likely to seek preventive care for themselves or family members. “Farmers can work up to 16 hours a day and they are not leaving the farm to come in for a screening,” she says.

But neither can they afford to be laid up. “Who is going to milk the cows?” Strebel says. “Who is going to get the work done? They know their health is important, but there also is this feeling that they can’t afford to leave the farm.”

ThedaCare provided \$60,000 in startup funds to get the program off the ground and continues to play a leading role through the Shawano County Foundation – the initiative’s fundraising arm – and other activities.



DOWN ON THE FARM. Rural health coordinator Rhonda Strebel makes farm calls to provide free health risk assessments, counselling and referrals. A lack of adequate insurance, coupled with a self-reliant spirit, prevented many Shawano County farmers from seeking routine checkups and preventive care.

“ThedaCare’s role has been invaluable,” says Ron Hillman, CEO of farm supplier Mid-County Cooperative, and chairman of a 20-member rural health committee that guides the initiative. “They identified the issue and brought it to the community.”

Sharon Hanks, ThedaCare’s director of physician services and a former committee co-chair, says the organization’s commitment stems from a “culture of sharing resources.” ThedaCare “brings community organizations together and serves as a cata-

lyst for change,” she says.

For more information on ThedaCare’s community connections, contact ThedaCare’s Morgen at paula.morgen@thedacare.org. For more information on the Foster McGaw Prize, visit www.aha.org/foster.