Chapter 5: Health, Wellness, and Safety
Introduction

Healthy and safe residents are cornerstone traits to a prosperous and thriving county. This chapter will explore the current state of public health, community wellness, and the status of safety in Boone County, in addition to past successes and future opportunities.

Public health is comprised of a large and complex network of social and physical influences such as land use, the environment, social norms, education, transportation, and health care. Collectively, the physical environment, built environment, and social construct of the community contribute to the overall public health of Boone County residents. Public safety includes the services, organizations, and programs that strive to both protect and preserve the community’s well-being, culture, and assets.

Health and Wellness

A topic that has often been overlooked in previous comprehensive planning efforts is public health, however this plan aims to change that in part because of the emphasis the community has placed on the subject throughout the public participation phase. Improving the overall health of the community was collectively voted a top priority by over 200 county residents.1 While the county currently ranks 14th in the state for overall health outcomes, there are still glaring needs within the population and gaps in the services provided.2 Some of the most significant weaknesses that were identified during the public participation phase were overall physical health of the population, mental health services, and access to health services.

There are several agencies and organizations that make up the public health services network in Boone County including the local health department and other county government services, clinics and immediate care facilities, social service organizations, mental health facilities, schools, food pantries, and the parks and recreation facilities.

Physical Health

Residents of Boone County have always strived to be physically healthy. This is no more evident than the countless recreational and exercise opportunities available, the investment of several major health care providers in the community, and the expansive array of social services provided. The county values a healthy population because it reduces the demand on public services and increases the overall livability of the community. In total, a physically healthy population is in the best interest of all residents, businesses, taxpayers, and governments.

A positive sign, in relation to the physical health of the community, is the increasing life expectancy of Boone County’s residents. This is a positive effect of some technological advances in medicine, care, and knowledge, but also the attitude and culture of the community. The current life expectancy of a Boone County resident in 2014 was 79 years old,3 up from 77 years old in 1990.4 That figure is
Nevertheless, Boone County is not without its weaknesses when it comes to physical health. There are several trends in diseases, behaviors, and practices that can be improved upon to promote the sustained long-term physical health of the community. The first is nutrition and exercise. In Boone County, 34% of all adults were obese in 2016. That’s up from 27% in 2011 and is 7% higher than both the state and country. In concert with this trend, the number of people diagnosed with diabetes has also been on the rise. In 1996, only 5.4% of adults were diagnosed with the disease, but by 2014 that figure rose to 8%. In a recent survey by the Boone County Health Department (BCHD) as part of their Mobilizing Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) Community Health Assessment and Community Health Improvement Strategic Planning Process, nearly 800 people were asked what their assessment was of the county population’s overall physical health, their own personal physical health, diet, and levels of exercise. The majority of responses for all questions cited a “somewhat healthy” response, meaning that they see room for improvement in this area. In an effort to reverse these trends, the BCHD recognized obesity and Type II diabetes as the top two health concerns for Boone County in their 2012 Illinois Project for Local Assessment of Needs (IPLAN). Both diseases have dedicated action plans within the document that are actively being worked on by the BCHD for reducing the county’s totals.

The second trend is the number of people diagnosed and dying from chronic diseases, particularly heart disease and cancer. Over the past seven years alone, 52% of all deaths in Boone County have been related to one of the two diseases. A sum of the next ten combined leading causes of death in the county do not even equal the total deaths from heart disease and cancer. The BCHD has recognized these issues and developed programs to address education, prevention, and awareness of the chronic diseases affecting Boone County. An example is the “Chronic Disease Prevention Program”, which focuses on monitoring individuals through screening and conducting general wellness tests for chronic diseases. Overall, the physical health of Boone County’s residents has both positive components and room for improvement moving forward.

Mental Health

Boone County has acknowledged that increasing mental health services is a high priority over the next 10 years, chiefly addiction and substance abuse. The most traditional forms of these issues are usually associated with tobacco and alcohol use, but a new substance is rapidly taking hold, opioids. Between 2010 and 2015, the number of overdose related hospitalizations in the county as a result of opioids or heroin has increased 175%. At a regional, state, and national level, similar trends exist. In the Community Assessment Survey conducted by the BCHD, illegal drug use was voted the most important health concern moving forward. The problem has even escalated to a level where the Federal Government has declared the opioid crisis a public health emergency.

Many different agencies, organizations, and partnerships are working to combat addiction and other mental health issues. First, Boone County has recently announced that it is suing several large pharmaceutical companies for compensation because of the role they played in producing opioids and pushing them to doctors and patients. Regionally, Winnebago County and the City of Rockford have jointly filed a similar lawsuit on the same basis. Second, there are two established groups made up of health and safety officials in Boone County who are already working together on substance abuse issues, the Boone County Drug Coalition and the Boone County Behavioral Task Force. Third, related to another addiction issue, is the “Illinois Tobacco Quitline” program. It provides free resources to encourage people to stop smoking through a partnership between the BCHD, Illinois Department of Public Health, and the American Lung Association. Lastly, the Boone County Council on Aging has developed multiple programs aimed at mental health for older residents, including the “Memory Café” and “To Your Health” event series. These and other related programs will be increasingly needed as the county’s population ages over the next decade. In total, mental health programs, resources, and education have become a priority in Boone County and will continue to be in the coming years.
Access and Reducing Inequities in Services

It was widely recognized throughout the public participation phase that there are two major improvements the county should be striving to accomplish when it comes to public health services; increase access and provide more equitable services.

Locally, there are a total of four small medical clinics within Boone County (all in the City of Belvidere) and several major hospital campuses in the region. The four clinics are conveniently located for a large portion of the county’s population, but they mainly provide routine-type check-ups and thus do not offer the more significant or specific health services some need. The proximity of the major medical centers regionally allows county residents to get top-notch, specialized services nearby. It also helps curb the demand for developing redundant health programs in Boone County. This and a collaborative approach to providing health services is especially important moving forward as resources and budgets continue to shrink. However, the issue of access will continue to be critically important as more residents are forced to travel greater distances routinely for medical care and services.

Boone County is similar to most rural counties across the nation where the transportation system has traditionally been automobile oriented. Without a personal vehicle, it is nearly impossible to travel to work, run errands, or access services. This has continuously caused difficulty for low income individuals and families who may not have access to a vehicle or younger and/or aging populations who cannot drive. In turn, these populations have significant obstacles when it comes to accessing medical care, social services, and nutritious foods. A more detailed description of existing weaknesses and future opportunities related to access is provided in Chapter 9: Transportation.

Boone County’s population is now over 20% of Hispanic Origin, with portions of that group speaking Spanish as their primary language. This has proven to be a barrier in engaging, communicating, and providing accurate services for the group because of cultural and language differences. Boone County government, specifically the BCHD, has made a concerted effort to reach the Latino community through the hiring of bi-lingual staff, translation of most written departmental materials into Spanish, community outreach targeting the Latino population, and engagement of community leaders. Utilizing these successes and pursuing future alternative opportunities are core to the continued effort of the county to provide equitable government services.
**Figure 5.5**
County and Regional Healthcare and Social Service Providers

**Key**
- Provider Locations

**Municipality**
- Belvidere
- Cherry Valley
- Loves Park
- Poplar Grove
- Rockford
- Timberlane
- County Border

**Source:** Boone County GIS Department, 2015; Region 1 Planning Council, 2018.

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Public Safety

Safety is critically important to the livability of a community. This is no different for the residents of Boone County especially because of the public safety situation within the region. Rockford and many of its neighboring municipalities have long struggled with high crime rates and it has driven many people to seek relocation. This trend, in part, has contributed to people moving to Boone County because it has consistently maintained low crime rates and safe communities through the proactive public safety services it provides. Moving forward, the community views maintaining its high quality public safety services as substantially important for a successful future.

The public safety services in Boone County are a combination of the 911 Call Center (shared between the county and City of Belvidere), Boone County Sheriff’s Department, Boone County Fire Districts 1-5, Boone County Circuit Court, Boone County Coroner’s Office, Boone County Emergency Management Agency, Boone County Public Defender’s Office, Boone County Corrections Office, Boone County Jail, Capron Rescue Squad, Candlewick Lake Public Safety, Belvidere Fire Department, and Belvidere Police Department.

Public Safety Services

Boone County is a small rural county, and because of this many public services are shared or consolidated for efficiency. An example of this is the 911 Call Center in Belvidere, which is a shared operation between the county and the City of Belvidere. The center fielded 78,548 emergency calls in 2016. Of those calls, 33,292 were specifically for the Boone County Sheriff’s Office.15

The Sheriff’s Department provides services to the entire county, including all municipalities other than the City of Belvidere. The same is true of the Boone County Fire Districts. The City of Belvidere operates its own public safety services within the city limits, but provides assistance and resources outside of the city, when needed. In total, there are currently 37 sworn deputies in the Sheriff’s Department and 88 volunteer firefighters in Boone County Fire Districts 1-5.16 The partnerships between the fire departments and police services has yielded effective results and because of this collaborative effort Boone County has maintained a high level of public safety.

Emergency management services and planning are also provided county-wide through a collaborative effort led by the Boone County Emergency Management Agency (EMA). EMA, led by the Boone County Sheriff’s Department includes county and municipal governments, public safety officials, first responders, and other local organizations who prepare, plan, and coordinate emergency response. Two additional groups partner with the EMA and focus on more specific elements of emergency management planning. The Public Health Emergency Preparedness Program (PHEP) centers on public health effects of emergencies and the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) focuses on chemical and hazardous spills.

Crime Rates

Crime rates are one of the most effective ways to rank and compare public safety across the state. There are three main categories of crime rates: property, violent, and drug arrests. Boone County overall ranks favorably in two out of the three categories. When it comes to property crime rates, the county ranks much lower than the state and near the middle among counties. In 2014, the property crime rate was 1,149 per 100,000 people, which is 59 out of 102 Illinois counties. Violent crime rates are also low at 143 per 100,000 people in 2014, which is 56 out of 102 counties. Drug crime arrests, however, are much higher than the state, and the county overall ranks third worst in that measure.17 While Boone County is largely considered by most residents and visitors to be safe, there is room for improvement in each of these three areas.

Through the public participation activities several specific weaknesses and potential opportunities were identified. A few key weaknesses that contributed to the previously mentioned crime rates include: shrinking resources, limited communication with the public, and increased drug usage. First, dwindling resources are not uncommon among small rural counties and Boone County is no different. Specifically, this weakness is not just isolated to public safety services, it is effecting all county...
government functions. In Chapter 7: Economic Development, this topic is explored in greater detail. Second, communication problems with the public can be attributed to many different issues and are again not just isolated to the public safety service providers. Specific detail on this topic is further explored in Chapter 6 Education and Public Communication. Finally, increased drug usage is an ever-growing issue in the county and region, and it too is detailed more extensively in a different section (see the Health and Wellness section above).

There are already strategies in place or opportunities identified to combat some of these weaknesses and help improve the overall crime rates in the county. One is the increased use of data, tracking measures, and obtainable targets to increase efficiency and effectiveness of services. The Sheriff’s Department has already started doing some of this internally, but it could be increasingly expanded upon over the next ten years. A second is furthering the strong connections already established between the county’s services (Sheriff’s Department and Fire Districts) and City of Belvidere’s services (Police and Fire Department). These agencies currently share the 911 Call Center and police station, they actively communicate and coordinate with each other, and ultimately provide more expansive coverage of the county with limited resources. The collaboration has proven successful for the community at-large, however increasing communication with the public through education, community outreach, and neighborhood watch programs can be effective tools for engaging the public in the future.

It is important to note that the collaborative and systematic approach currently being utilized is working to provide high levels of public safety for Boone County residents, and it will continue to remain a priority over the next decade. However, to maintain and improve upon those services it is also important to build off of the successes of existing programs, initiatives, and communication already in place, while also striving to innovate, utilize technology, and be proactive.
FIGURE 5.8
PUBLIC SAFETY SERVICE PROVIDER BOUNDARIES AND LOCATIONS

KEY
- Police Center*
- Fire Stations
- Fire Districts
- Belvidere Muni. Fire Coverage

POLICE DISTRICTS
- Belvidere PD
- Cherry Valley PD
- Boone Co. Sheriff’s Department
- Loves Park PD
- Water

* Police Center includes the Belvidere Police Station, Boone County Sherriff's Office, Boone County Jail, Boone County Court House, and combined 911 Dispatch Center

Source: Boone County GIS Department, 2015; Region 1 Planning Council, 2018.
Health and Wellness Goals, Objectives, & Strategies

Equal access to health and wellness services for all community members.

**OBJECTIVES**

Improve access for residents to health and wellness services.

Increase the public’s knowledge of the health and wellness services available within the county and region.

Continuously provide equitable health and wellness services.

**STRATEGIES**

Continue to pursue coordination and shared resources between other county health departments, health coalitions, and regional entities.

Encourage local businesses to establish and promote wellness programs.

Expand public transportation routes within Boone County and increase public transportation programs to connect underserved populations with limited mobility to major medical facilities in the region.

Leverage Boone County’s proximity to several regional-medical centers.

Continue to assist medical providers with expanding and locating services in the county.

Leverage established partnerships between public agencies and human services organizations to reach a greater number of people.

Improve the level of engagement and outreach with the Latino population.

Utilize local businesses and church communities to establish new connections with minority populations.

Pursue new programs or resources to more efficiently utilize technology that improves public access to County-provided services.

Allow all populations to use and access services.

Increase awareness and recognition of cultural differences by encouraging policies which improve service provision to all county demographics.

Pursue opportunities to expand services that allow a greater number of residents to age in place, such as in-home care.

Expand services for children and families, especially young mothers.

Establish a mental health division in the Boone County Health Department.

Develop and promote more programs to help homeless populations.

Develop and promote more programs to address drug addiction, substance abuse, and recovery.

Find new or alternative long-term funding options for services and programs.

Pursue alternative transportation options/improvements that promote healthier living.

Develop healthy food/nutrition, heart disease, and physical health education and programs.

Partner with the Boone County Conservation District, Belvidere Park District, and the school districts to create more engaging physical activities for all populations.

Explore partnerships with the region’s post-secondary education institutions, such as UIC College of Medicine, Saint Anthony College of Nursing, and Rock Valley College as resources for health education.

Foster increased overall public health for Boone County residents.

**OBJECTIVES**

Improve access to mental health services.

Strive for physical health improvements population-wide.

**STRATEGIES**

Establish a mental health division in the Boone County Health Department.

Develop and promote more programs to help homeless populations.

Develop and promote more programs to address drug addiction, substance abuse, and recovery.

Find new or alternative long-term funding options for services and programs.

Pursue alternative transportation options/improvements that promote healthier living.

Develop healthy food/nutrition, heart disease, and physical health education and programs.

Partner with the Boone County Conservation District, Belvidere Park District, and the school districts to create more engaging physical activities for all populations.

Explore partnerships with the region’s post-secondary education institutions, such as UIC College of Medicine, Saint Anthony College of Nursing, and Rock Valley College as resources for health education.
Safety Goals, Objectives, & Strategies

Maintain and continue to improve upon the high quality of public safety provided in Boone County.

OBJECTIVES

Continue to make Boone County a safer community by lowering overall crime rates.

Increase communication, community relationships, and public safety transparency.

Develop proactive and preventative methods for providing all forms of public safety services.

STRATEGIES

Develop new and expand existing programs to educate youth about drug use.

Create neighborhood watch programs throughout the county.

Research and pursue replication of existing public safety best practices that have proven successful in other similar areas.

Maintain coordination and communication with regional and municipal public safety agencies.

Increase the accuracy of the 911 dispatch services through upgrading the technology used.

Increase communication between public safety agencies and citizens through multiple communication forms, specifically through social media.

Increase levels of public interaction and community involvement by Sheriff’s Department employees.

Highlight the outstanding personnel and volunteers that provide public safety services in Boone County.

Actively pursue new connections between public safety staff and the Latino population.

Use performance measures and data to prioritize resources and plan for future need.

Increase coordination with other governments to minimize budgetary constraints and avoid duplication of services.

Maintain and continue to improve upon the high quality of public safety provided in Boone County.
Chapter 5 Sources

Text

1. Boone County Comprehensive Plan public participation events. See Appendix Page. X.


Chapter 5 Sources

Figures


5. R1PC GIS, 2018


8. Boone County GIS, 2018