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## **COUNTY HEALTH RANKINGS**

Washington, D.C.

Good morning and welcome. I'm Risa Lavizzo Mourey president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

It is my privilege to join with colleagues, our distinguished speakers and many partners for the release of the *County Health Rankings*.

This is a first. The first set of reports ever produced to rank the overall health of every county in all 50 states.

Before I go any further, I want to take this opportunity to personally thank Dr. Patrick Remington and his team at the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute for their dedication, energy and wisdom.

It took all those qualities, and a tremendous amount of hard work to bring us to this point. Pat, it's been an honor and a privilege for us to collaborate with you on this project.

As you can imagine, producing 50 state reports for more than 3,000 counties is a momentous task. And it may not surprise you to know that there's a story behind this effort.

As many of you know, The University of Wisconsin team has been doing county rankings in their home state since 2003. At the Foundation, we had been very interested observers of the Wisconsin Rankings.

So When Pat and his colleague Dave Kindig approached us about expanding the Wisconsin model to a handful of other states, we said ... why stop at five? Let's do all 50 states.

I think it took Pat and Dave a few seconds to start breathing again. But they recovered quickly, hit the ground running and never looked back.

Pat, your team did it. And you have our thanks and gratitude.

We also thank the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Dartmouth Institute in New Hampshire.

Their help was invaluable along the way.

I also want to recognize a number of partners with us today: the National Association of County and City Health Officials, which represents the nation's local health departments and the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, which represents state health departments. They have worked closely with us every step of the way.

We also want to recognize United Health Foundation and the American Public Health Association and Partnership for Prevention for their leadership in producing *America's Health Rankings*.

We view the County Health Rankings as an important companion effort to America's Health Rankings.

So why are the County health rankings important? Well for one they help tell a story about the factors that influence how healthy we are and how long we live.

They tell us that our health depends on more than medical care. And they tell us that health happens in our communities—where we live, learn, work and play.

Several weeks ago, the *Washington Post* featured a front-page story about how Prince Georges County—just a few miles from where we are today—was taking steps to address its health challenges.

The story pointed out how along a two-block stretch of one of the main roads in the County there are 11 fast-food restaurants.

Why should they care about the food choices for people who live near that area? Because it affects their health. Prince Georges County is one of the least healthy counties in Maryland, ranking 17<sup>th</sup> out of 24 counties.

Nearly a third of residents there are obese—which we know can lead to diabetes, high-blood pressure and other unhealthy conditions that can shorten lives and increase health costs.



The important part of this story is that the community is doing something about the problem. Community leaders are working on ways to make healthier foods more easily available to its residents and limiting the spread of outlets that sell less healthy foods.

We'll hear more about this later from one of our speakers, Doctor Don Shell, health officer in Prince Georges County.

But this effort is a perfect illustration of why the *County Health Rankings* are an important tool for improving health. When communities have the information they need to pinpoint problems, they have a better chance of solving those problems.

Let me give another example. In a few moments you'll see a video about Juneau County, Wisconsin.

As I mentioned, Pat Remington and his team have been releasing county health rankings in Wisconsin for a number of years.

Well in one of those years-2006-Juneau was the lowest ranking county in the state.

When stories about the state rankings hit the front page of local newspapers, there was Juneau, conspicuously at the bottom of the list of 72 Wisconsin counties. So what did they do about it?

You'll hear from Barb Theis, a health officer in Juneau, about how the *County Health Rankings* were a wake-up call—and, more importantly, a catalyst for change in their community.

I won't give away any more of the story. But Juneau County is another terrific example of what we think can and will happen as a result of the County Health Rankings.

So what might action actually look like in other counties and how do we get there?

Action starts with information and awareness. Which is why today is so significant.

We believe it's important to provide the information stakeholders need, in a form that they can use, and from a source they can trust.

Through this briefing—through outreach to media and policy-makers, and in partnership with many of you here today—we are raising awareness.

But awareness isn't enough. We need to generate both understanding and action.

So we've worked with our team at the University of Wisconsin to create a robust Web site.

The information is in the packets you received today.

But for those tuning in to our webcast, here is a very important address for the *County Health Rankings:* 

## www.countyhealthrankings.org

The Web site will get you right to your county so you can see how you are doing and compare with others in your state.

You will find links to tools and resources for action. And we've made it easy for you to engage others within and outside your community through social media channels.

Social media will be a vital tool for creating conversation, seeking fresh ideas and engaging new partners.

I want to hear those ideas.

So Dr. Remington and I will be participating in a LIVE question-and answer event on *Twitter* today from 2-3 p.m. Eastern Standard Time.

If you would like to join, follow the @RWJF\_pubhealth (at-RWJF-underscore-pubhealth) *Twitter* feed and use the hashtag *healthrankings* in any of your tweets.

The second step in driving action is bringing together the right group of people and keeping them together.

The health of a community is everyone's responsibility and it will take <u>all</u> of us working together to transform our communities to make them the healthiest they can be.

I know that many of our public health partners are playing a convening role at both the state and local level in anticipation of the rankings.

You'll hear a little later from Dr. Judy Monroe, Indiana's health commissioner, about what public health is doing in her state.



But Judy knows, as I do, that public health won't solve health problems working alone.

We also need business, education, health care, faith groups and community advocates at the table to pinpoint problems and work on solutions.

So how else are we getting to action? Well, the *County Health Rankings* allow each county within a state to compare how it's doing relative to other counties in the state, including its neighbors. There's much to be learned about what's working—and what isn't—by reaching out across county lines.

Connecting with your neighbors and understanding how and why you rate differently is essential. So is zooming out and understanding how public health fits in the larger health story.

By ranking on a series of health factors, such as:

- Access to healthy foods;
- Safe places to be active;
- Level of education;
- The number of children living in poverty;
- The number of liquor stores, and
- How healthy the air quality is ...

Community leaders and decision-makers can see the many factors that influence the health of their community and that of their neighbors.

In other words, where we live, learn, work, and play matters to our health. It matters a lot.

What else matters in spurring action and making it sustainable, is evidence.

Monitoring progress with rigorous and appropriately timed indicators is critical to knowing whether change is taking place. The *County Health Rankings* will allow each County to measure progress over time on both health outcomes and the factors that contribute to health.

They can also use the Rankings to mark progress toward improving.

Now I recognize these are difficult times. Budgets are tight. Resources are scarce. Every sector, every community, and every family has felt the impact of the down economy.

But I contend that, in times like these, good data and good evidence are more important than ever.

When the RWJF Commission to Build a Healthier America released its final report last year, one of its key recommendations was to ensure that decision-makers in all sectors have the evidence they need to build health into public and private policies and practices.

The *County Health Rankings* provides that evidence. While evidence is essential, so are insight and understanding. Health is personal and it's local. These *Rankings* are a snapshot. Data that can inform and guide. But they are not impervious to the ideas, energy, passion and creativity that reside in every community.

It is our hope that the Rankings inspire you as they have inspired us. This is the beginning of a new chapter in the health of our nation, and I can't wait to watch this story unfold.

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