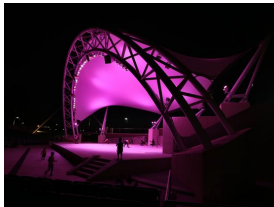


Year in Review-Top health stories of 2015



Nubyras J. Wilborn, Democrat staff writer 5:48 p.m. EST December 30, 2015



(Photo: Glenn Beil/Democrat)

Residents of Tallahassee and the surrounding counties in the Big Bend stood strong in the face of various health-related issues in 2015.

Health care professionals and concerned members of the community are actively seeking solutions to issues such as infant mortality, breast cancer and the racial divide in healthy outcomes. Below are a five stories, which highlight some of the pressing issues and some of the solutions.

Leon County black infant mortality rates increase

Leon County saw an increase in its infant mortality rate last year fueled by an increase in black infant deaths, according to data released in July by the Florida Department of Health.

Leon County's 2014 overall rate was 7.1 deaths per 1,000 live births, which represents an increase of 1.8 from 2013. The state of Florida has a 6.0 overall rate.

In Leon County, the mortality rate for white births decreased from 5.1 in 2013 to 3.1 in 2014.

Meanwhile, the black infant mortality rate locally jumped to 11.7 in 2014 from 4.8 in 2013. The statewide rate was 11.0 for black infants.

Last year, 22 infants died in Leon County, including five white children and 15 black children. During the same period, there were 3,085 live births, among them 1,616 white babies and 1,284 black.

The disparity in the black and white mortality rates reflects cultural and historical factors, said Claudia Blackburn, health officer of the Florida Department of Health in Leon County.

"There are still issues in health equity that affect the African-American population disparately," said Blackburn. "That is, too many live in unsafe neighborhoods, don't have access to nutritious food or health care and lack good educational opportunities."

Leon County racial disparities trouble health care workers.

Leon County's black residents are dying sooner, they're more obese and have less access to health care than their white neighbors.

According to the 2014 U.S. Census, 35.9 percent of Leon's black residents live below the poverty level compared to 17.5 percent of whites.

That income inequality is reflected in the health of both racial groups. From 2012-2014, there were 856.5 black deaths per 100,000 compared to 713.8 white deaths. Blacks are dying at higher rates from heart disease, cancer, diabetes and stroke, records show.

"Sometimes we're afraid to talk about race as a factor in health inequity, but we need to have these conversations," said Dr. Joedrecka Brown, of the Florida State University College of Medicine. "Racism is a system of structured inequity that has three tiers-- institutional, personally mediated and internalized; we have to address each. This affects quality of life, care and how you're treated when you get care."

In 2013, blacks in Leon County were 5.9 percent more likely to be diagnosed with high blood pressure than whites, according to the Centers of Disease Control. They're 6.5 percent more likely to be affected by coronary heart disease, heart attack or stroke.

Another area of concern is the number of AIDS/HIV cases. In 2012-2014, there were 276 reported HIV cases, 223 or 81 percent of those are black and 42 or 15 percent are white.

"We're doing better in treating people with HIV, but now we have to focus on prevention," said Jamel Diaz of Big Bend Cares. "We need to come together and figure out how to keep our county healthy."