



Access to care and mental illness top the list of health problems in Alabama

nighttime dialysis treatment at Fresenius Medical Care

Earl Parker, 46, starts his treatment Tuesday Oct 5, 2010 at Fresenius Medical Care at USA Medical Center. Alabama residents have high rates of chronic illness that may lead to kidney disease, and low rates of access to medical care. (Press-Register/John David Mercer) *(JOHN DAVID MERCER)*

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Alabamians' health problems often begin with premature birth and continue to the end of life, which is increasingly affected by Alzheimer's Disease – and they are aggravated by a lack of basic care, according to a state report.

The Alabama Department of Public Health conducted surveys and held a number of public forums to gather input for its first state-wide Community Health Assessment, which will be finalized this week. Those who want to weigh in on a draft of the report can visit **this website**.

"We want this to be a living document," said Carrie Allison, block grant coordinator for the Alabama Department of Public Health.

State residents overwhelmingly identified access to care as a major health concern. Many residents of the state lack transportation, health insurance and even primary care doctors – which can make medical care difficult to obtain in many parts of the state.

Four counties need to add more than 10 full-time doctors to meet the health needs of the community, including Blount, Dale, Elmore and St. Clair, according to the report. Thirteen more counties are close to optimal provider levels, and only need one or two more full-time primary care physicians. But even counties with sufficient numbers of primary care providers lack additional healthcare services.

Having enough doctors won't help patients without the means to get to the clinic. In Bullock County, 16 percent of residents don't own a car, compared to less than 7 percent statewide. Residents of rural counties were more likely than those in urban counties to live without cars.

Lack of insurance particularly affects the state's Hispanic community, according to the report. More than a third of Hispanic residents lack health insurance, compared to just 12.9 percent for Caucasian residents.

More than 20 percent of the residents of DeKalb and Franklin counties lack insurance, according to the assessment.

Alabama residents identified mental illness and substance abuse as the second greatest health concern in the state,

citing the shortage of mental health providers and the high costs of incarcerating drug users.

The suicide rate increased between 2011 and 2013. Men are four times more likely to die from suicide than women, according to the report. More than 71 percent of suicides in Alabama involve Caucasian men, according to the report.

The state's poor pregnancy outcomes came in third on the list, followed by nutrition and physical activity, cardiovascular diseases, sexually-transmitted infections, cancer, child abuse and neglect, diabetes, geriatrics, injury and violence prevention, oral health and cigarette smoking.

The report contains chapters devoted to each health concern, with statistics that illustrate the extent of the problems. Allison said she hopes organizations can use the data to apply for grants that directly address some of the state's health problems.

"They say the first step to recovery is admitting there's a problem," Allison said. "This is giving us the data of where our problems are so we can develop a community health improvement plan to address them."

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