Plan envisions improved health and wellness efforts

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BAR HARBOR — A county-wide health action plan envisions increased access to local food, greater opportunities for movement and a host of other healthy lifestyle changes for area residents.

The Community Health Improvement Plan 2012-2016 was put together by Bar Harbor-based Healthy Acadia, and is the culmination of years of work by coalitions and community groups from throughout Hancock County, said Healthy Acadia’s executive director Doug Michael. The plan was released this fall.

“It was quite a process getting to this point. Along the way, we have amassed a group of...constituents that are really excited about key aspects of this plan,” Mr. Michael said. “Throughout the process, we wanted to take what we were hearing and put it into a framework for action.”

That framework includes five major goals, including local food, movement, healthful services, positive social development, and environmental health. Each goal is divided into objectives, and each of these is further divided into concrete action steps that can be assessed and measured.

The goals reflect the results of countless hours of work by community groups and volunteers who did hundreds of interviews that sought to determine the health-related issues that are most important to local people, said Elsie Flemings, development director for Healthy Acadia. The interviews further sought to determine those issues that people would be most likely to work on, she said.

“Our process was to look for...what do people have energy around?” Ms. Flemings said. “People asked us, ‘What do you mean by ‘health,” and we said, ‘We mean what you mean.”

Each goal in the plan is broken down into two primary objectives. With regards to local food, objectives include increasing by 20 the number of community outlets providing increased access to locally harvested foods, and increasing by 10 the number of schools in the county that take part in farm to school programs.

The movement goal envisions at least four schools adopting programs or policies that support walking or biking, and four community programs being created or expanded for daily physical activity. The healthful services goal, meanwhile, would see a 25-percent increase in the number of rides provided to and from health services for people in need, and would increase by 1,000 the number of low-income children receiving dental services.

Goal four, positive social development, envisions 10 schools adopting or expanding health policies and programs, and reducing by 15 percent the rate of alcohol and substance abuse among youth and adults. Goal five, healthy environments, would see an increase by 300 of the number of homes and offices with reduced risk of lead, arsenic and other contaminants, and would increase by 300 the number of homes and offices that have taken efficiency measures.

The overall plan is by no means limited to the list of specific objectives, Mr. Michael said, but is really meant to be a starting point in an evolving process.

“This is a distributed, decentralized, open source kind of plan,” Mr. Michael said. “We’re really hoping to stimulate people’s thinking.”

Those people will come from community groups, task forces, individuals, businesses, schools, churches and nonprofits, and they are really the ones who will be doing the work of improving health in Hancock County, Ms. Flemings said. As such, Healthy Acadia is happy to take the lead in connecting people and groups together to get the work done.

“We’re excited to be in touch with folks that are using this plan, and we welcome anybody who may want to become engaged with any parts of this plan to contact us,” Mr. Flemings said. “There is a lot of work going on right now, and a lot of opportunity to make a difference.”

The entire Community Health Improvement Plan 2012-2016 can be found at HealthyAcadia.org, under the resources section.