
George Wolfe: Assessing -- and improving -- the quality of life in Santa Cruz County

As we enter the season of holiday giving and receiving, I'd like to propose a unique community asset for which we should all be thankful: the Community Assessment Project of Santa Cruz County. CAP is a collaborative project led by the United Way that aims to improve the quality of life of Santa Cruz County residents by tracking key indicators in several areas: the economy, the natural environment, health, education, public safety and the social environment.

Our county is not the only one to gather data in an effort to see how well we're doing and where we might be able to improve. In fact, we borrowed the idea from other places that had already tried this. We have been doing this a long time, though -- since 1994. Along the way, the Santa Cruz CAP has won national recognition, earning a Community Indicator Innovator Award in 1997 from the Brookings Institution.

We appreciate the national awards, but what we're most proud of is our local track record. Since 1994, hundreds of community volunteers have served on committees and given thoughtful feedback that helps us figure out goals, priorities and what we want to know about each of these. Every year, our research partner, Applied Survey Research, collects data from lots of different sources -- including a countywide telephone survey with customized questions -- and presents all of it in a report that is available on CAP's website, www.santacruzcountycap.org.

Every five years, we adjust the goals to respond to changes in local conditions. The setting of goals allows us, as a community, to focus our activities to achieve the goals. In the health area, past goals have stimulated successful, ongoing efforts to reduce drug and alcohol use among our youth, increase the use of health information technology among health care providers, increase the number of adults in our county who have made their end-of-life wishes known and other programs to improve the community's health. Our health goals for 2015 are to reduce childhood obesity, provide health insurance for low-income children and make sure all Santa Cruz County residents have access to primary care.

The process of identifying goals in each area and seeing which ones rise to the top is open and inclusive. [For information on how to get involved, click on the "Ways to Get Involved" tab on our website.] The effort in each goal area is led by a "champion organization" that takes on the tasks of setting goals within its content area, engaging the public and encouraging action to address the goals. The champion organization for the health goals is the Health Improvement Partnership HIP, a local countywide collaborative of health, foundation, government and community leaders.

CAP also recognizes that many individuals are the energetic, persistent moving force behind a lot of community improvements. To recognize their work in the trenches, CAP solicits nominations for Community Heroes and celebrates their contributions at public events. [Community heroes -- both current and past -- also can be found on our website.]

We hope you'll join us in being thankful for this unique community resource focused on tracking and improving everyone's quality of life -- and get involved in setting and accomplishing future CAP goals.

George Wolfe, MD, is a local public health physician who retired as Santa Cruz County's Health Officer and now serves as chairman of CAP's steering committee and as a member of the Health Improvement Partnership.