

Business
Wednesday October
16, 2002

The Courier-Journal

Metro

www.courier-journal.com

Automaker, union team up on health assessment of area

By Patrick Howington

Louisville-area residents have relatively high death rates from cancer, high blood pressure, and heart, liver and lung diseases, compared to other groups of people.

The area's women are particularly burdened with chronic disease and cancer. They have death rates from heart, kidney and other diseases of more than twice the national average for women, plus high lung-cancer mortality.

And Louisville-area residents cause some of these health problems by smoking and drinking more than the national norm.

These are among the findings of a health assessment commissioned by the United Auto Workers and the Ford Motor Co. A summary of the findings in the 18-month study was released yesterday; specific findings will be released in a few weeks.

What's striking about the study is not so much what it found but who did it--- traditional adversaries who are outside the health-care industry. That adds credibility, local health experts said.

"When we get a major employer and the workers working towards improving the quality of health for the community--- that's a significant thing," said Dr. Wayne Tuckson, a Louisville colorectal surgeon who attended a presentation of the findings.

The study was prepared by The Lewin Group, a consulting firm based in Washington, D.C. It covers seven counties --- Jefferson, Bullitt and Oldham in Kentucky and Clark, Floyd, Harrison and Scott in Indiana. The counties make up the Louisville Metropolitan Statistical Area -- often called the MSA.

Louisville is the eighth auto-manufacturing community whose health has been studied by the UAW and the automakers since 1994. The first study was done by the UAW and General Motors in Flint, Mich.

This is the second study to be conducted by Ford, which operates two assembly plants in Jefferson County that employ more than 10,000 people. GM and Daimler Chrysler each have partnered on three studies.

The UAW and the industry began teaming up on the studies in hopes of improving health-care outcomes and the cost after national health-care reform efforts failed in the early 1990s.

The two parties "decided that to have an impact on health care.... We had to address it for the whole community, and not just look at our employees and our union members," said Mary Lyle, the UAW's co-director of the Louisville MSA Community Healthcare Initiative.

"We could continue to negotiate contracts in order to give us good (health-coverage) rates maybe this year, but maybe within a year or two they would always come back to be higher again, so we were constantly fighting that battle," she said.

Copies of the report have been given to local health-care, government and business leaders, and Lyle said meetings will be held to identify health issues that could be addressed through the community effort.

Among the findings:

- A relatively high proportion of women report using tobacco and alcohol during pregnancy, which can be dangerous to a newborn's health. Twenty percent reported tobacco use during pregnancy in 1999, compared to 14.6 percent nationwide.
- Thirty-eight percent of area residents reported being overweight, 60 percent said they lead a sedentary lifestyle, and 37 percent reported having inadequate diets -- figures that are in line with norms for the nation or comparable-size cities.

If the study is to lead to a community wide health initiative, officials have a couple of prospective targets.

Lynn Howard, Louisville Mayor Dave Armstrong's aide for health, said the findings on obesity and heart disease suggest a need for a community wide fitness campaign.

But Gary Cusick, chief epidemiologist for the Louisville/Jefferson County Health Department, said the prime target should be smoking.

Smoking inflates a number of the disease and health statistics, the study found for Louisville, he said.

Cusick and others said high smoking rates could be the reason for the finding, otherwise difficult to explain, of much higher death rates for area women for certain conditions.

Several of those conditions – heart disease, lung disease and lung trachea and bronchus – can be caused by smoking.