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Health report mixed for county youths

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A recent compilation of statistics on children's health in Oregon indicates that Jefferson County youths fared relatively well in some categories, and not so well in others.

For instance, for the early childhood years, Jefferson County in 1999 had a better performance rating than the state in two important categories. The infant mortality rate for the county in 1999 was 3.2 per 1,000 live births. The state average in this category was 5.8 per 1,000 live births.

The incidence of low birth weight in Jefferson County last year was 49.7 per 1,000 live births; while the state average was 53.7 per 1,000 live births.

"The low infant mortality rate, and particularly the low birth weights, are related to the county's prenatal programs, and the participation of the local providers," commented Jerry Street, director of Jefferson County Public Health.

On the other hand, in the category of early child care supply, the county was behind the state, which averaged 21.3 child care spaces per 100 children

ages 0 to 12. In Jefferson County the rate was 16.6 child care spaces per 100 children ages 0 to 12.

The county should improve its performance in this category during the year 2000, as the Juniper Junction Early Childhood Center is set to open this month. "That is expected to have a positive impact," Street said.

The statistics are for the year 1999. The study was compiled by Children First for Oregon, a statewide nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization for children and families.

The group's annual County Data Book is the state's only comprehensive source of data on the well-being of children in Oregon. Other information in the recent publication includes the following:

In the area of teen safety, the county last year had a rate of juvenile arrests of 85.6 per 1,000 people ages 0 to 17. The statewide average was 53.7 per 1,000.

The incidence of teen pregnancy in the county was 32.9 per 1,000 girls ages 10 to 17. The statewide average was 17.2 per 1,000.

Jefferson County has a history of high teen pregnancy. There are a variety of factors which contribute to this problem, Street said.

"I'm relatively new here myself," commented Street, who became health department director last year. "But from what I've been told, part of this tends to be cultural."

He pointed out that the Madras High School teen parenting program, for instance, includes a "very high percentage of Warm Springs students."

"In terms of the costs and benefits, teen pregnancy may be looked at differently in the Warm Springs community," Street said. "I'm not saying that is the whole answer, but it is part of it."

Other factors, he said, are teen education and supervision. For instance, some teens have made the decision to be sexually active, but have not made use of available birth control services.

Also, Street pointed out, a high percentage of teen pregnancies occur during the week between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m. "That raises a supervision issue," he said.

In the area of child safety, Jefferson County fared better than the state in one category, but worse in other categories.

On the positive side, the rate of child abuse and neglect in Jefferson County in 1999 was 5.8 victims

per 100,000 people ages 0 to 17.

This figure was better than the statewide average of 12.3 per 100,000. However, in the category of child deaths, the county rate is substantially worse than the overall statewide rate.

For 1999, the child death rate in the county was 94.9 per 100,000 people ages 1 to 14. (The actual number was four child deaths in the county last year.)

The statewide rate of child deaths for 1999 was 23.7 per 100,000 people ages 1 to 14.

While the state last year saw an improvement in this category from previous years, Jefferson County saw a slight worsening.

Local youths, however, had a lower incidence of suicide attempts than did those in the state as a whole.

In Jefferson County for 1999, the teen suicide attempt rate was 16.7 per 100,000 people ages 10 to 17.

The statewide average was 200 suicide attempts per 100,000 people ages 10 to 17.