

Public health workers help Yellowstone County thrive

By Melissa Henderson

RiverStone Health sanitarians inspect commercial food vendors to ensure that food sold locally is safe to eat. Our public health nurses work with parents and community healthcare providers to protect kids from preventable diseases. Our education specialists join with many local partners in programs such as suicide prevention and safe routes to schools. These are a few examples of the ways that public health works for you.

The Yellowstone City-County Health Department, which does business as RiverStone Health, is the largest health department in Montana and serves the county's 170,000 residents. It is our job to make sure everyone who lives or visits here is protected to the best of our ability. Some Montana health departments have just one part-time staffer; ours employs nearly 70 people. Regardless of size, public health professionals are public servants who work to improve quality of life.

Local and state health departments are celebrating National Public Health Week April 1-7. We focus on the services our agencies provide to our communities to prevent disease, protect the public and promote health.

Public health in Montana has existed for more than a century. Nationally, public health efforts have doubled life expectancy. On average, Americans live nearly 30 years longer than they did a century ago. Public health professionals ensure access to clean water, safe food, quality health care, safe schools, sound policy and healthy habits.

The public health workforce are your neighbors, friends and family members. At RiverStone Health, our staff works year-round to improve life, health and safety. Our compassionate experts include more than a dozen nurses, 11 registered sanitarians, three dietitians, 11 case managers and nearly 20 health educators or prevention specialists. We do everything we can to earn our neighbors' trust by consistently delivering high quality services.

Collaboration is necessary to solve many of our community's most pressing health challenges. Partnerships with other organizations, groups, and clients themselves are key to looking at the issues from all sides to create solutions.

Each of us signed up for the public health profession because we want to see our neighbors thrive.

Public health staff are well-trained professionals with many specialties and certifications to support the unique needs of our programs and the people we serve. For example, health inspectors are trained in microbiology and must sit for an exam before they are qualified to conduct inspections. Health educators are trained in coalition building, community engagement and behavior change. Nurses working as home visitors through our Nurse-Family Partnership receive rigorous training before ever setting foot in someone's home. Many of our team members have earned specialized training, licenses, certificates or graduate degrees in their fields.

We are committed to being culturally responsive and reflective of the people we serve.

Whether you are in Billings, Laurel, Worden, Custer or Broadview, your public health workforce cares for you. We live in the communities we serve. Our services and actions impact ourselves, our families, and our neighbors. We wouldn't have it any other way.

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