

# County Health Rankings: Talking to media

## Release activities

MDH typically does not issue a news release on the day the Rankings are officially released. Instead, if we get media calls, we try to coordinate with local public health departments and encourage media to contact local public health departments for more information.

## Key messages in the MDH news release

- Minnesota is consistently ranked as one of the healthiest states in the country
- The Rankings are one snapshot of the health of our communities
- There are always places where we can improve
- This is an opportunity to shine a light on the many elements that factor into health—the Rankings are valuable because they go beyond clinical care to explore the diverse factors that determine health

## Preparing for the media – reactive or proactive

- After you get your rankings, decide whether you want to take a proactive approach, like sending a news release, or a reactive one, such as answering the questions of the media if they call. Either way, you should develop some key messages and talking points.
- You can consider sending an embargoed news release to local media about your rank, prior to the official Rankings release
- Do this if you think your ranking will highlight or help promote an important public health issue in your community
- This gives them time to digest the data and get quotes from spokespeople, so they can be ready to publish stories when the Rankings are officially released
- This may depend on how you rank and your media relations capabilities
- If you have weekly newspapers, think about how you can help them meet their deadline
- View this as an opportunity to talk about public health
- Use the release to get your message out

## Developing your key messages

To prepare for news releases and interviews, you could prepare key message that emphasize:

- How rankings like this can be a valuable tool to raise awareness about public health issues
- How you are using other tools to measure the health of your county
- The most important findings for your county

- Work you have done in high-ranking areas
- Work you are doing to address lower-ranking areas
- That a low or high ranking may indicate the need for greater public health investments, or affirm the benefits of high levels of investments
- How you are involving partners in improving the health of your county (especially in areas that may not be under the direct control of public health)
- How you plan to use the Rankings to stimulate community conversations about improving health

## Delivering your message

Share your key messages with all potential spokespeople. Consider enlisting supporting partners to be spokespeople on your behalf. Anticipate tough questions; prepare a Q&A, and practice with spokespeople. **Use stories when possible to illustrate how you are improving health in your county.**

## Managing the interview

### Ahead of time

- Involve your public information officer or communications specialist
- Find out what you can about the reporter
- Find out the reporter's deadline
- If the interview is for electronic media, find out if it will be live or taped (and other logistics)

### Managing the interview

- Have your key messages in your head
- Use precise words and short sentences
- Avoid jargon and acronyms
- Rephrase loaded questions and don't repeat negative words
- Bridge from negative questions to your key messages
- Don't be defensive about the Rankings
- Be candid
- Never say, "No comment"
- Never argue with reporters
- Don't assume anything is "off the record"
- Don't feel the need to fill gaps in the conversation
- Offer written background information and additional spokespeople

### TV or radio interviews

- Be articulate
- Avoid "hmmms" and "ahhhs"
- Speak in shorter sentences
- Be conversational (e.g., don't sound as if you are reading key messages)

## COUNTY HEALTH RANKINGS: TALKING TO MEDIA

- Relax
- Look directly at the reporter (not at the camera)
- Don't fidget
- Dress professionally and avoid loud or tight patterns (e.g., herringbone)

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