

2024-2025



**Southwest Nebraska
Public Health Department**

ANNUAL REPORT

PREVENT, PROMOTE, PROTECT



Mission Statement

The mission of Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department is to empower individuals, foster collaborative partnerships, and advance the well-being of our communities through public health best practices.

Our Vision

A future where all people thrive and grow within safe and vibrant communities.

Our Values

Flexibility
Equity
Integrity
Empowering

Board of Health



● Chase County
Jacci Brown, Commissioner
Larry Carpenter

● Hitchcock County
Ron Wertz, Commissioner
Darcie Johnson

● Dundy County
Sye Tecker, Commissioner
Rita Jones

● Keith County
Joan Ervin, Commissioner
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● Red Willow County
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● Furnas County
Mike Sexton, Commissioner
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● Perkins County
Mark Bottom, Commissioner
Laurie Walrod

● Hayes County
Kevin Fornoff, Commissioner
Leon Kolbet

● Physician
Shiuvaun Jaeger, MD

● Dentist
Scott Tobias, DDS

Public Health Emergency Preparedness



Over the past year, the Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) program at Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department made major strides in improving emergency readiness and response. The Emergency Response Plan was fully updated to align with current public health guidance, and staff contributed to the statewide Integrated Preparedness Plan. The team also started work on an Administrative Preparation Plan to ensure operations can continue smoothly during future emergencies. Progress was also made in managing the Strategic National Stockpile, with improved plans for distributing medical supplies and medications. Agreements were made with local partners to activate Points of Dispensing (PODs) if needed. Staff helped plan updates for the Nebraska Plains Healthcare Coalition, which will improve coordination during health emergencies. They also participated in multiple training events, workshops, and full-scale exercises to strengthen local and regional response efforts. Surveillance staff closely monitored disease activity and played a key role in responding to a local tuberculosis outbreak. These efforts reflect the department's strong commitment to public health and emergency preparedness across the region.

Disease Surveillance

Disease Report	Number of cases
Animal Exposure (bite or non-bite)	24
Bloodborne & Invasive (hepatitis, etc.)	18
Foodborne, Enteric (salmonella, Ecoli, campylobacter, etc.)	51
Lead Poisoning	12
Parasitic & Fungal (toxoplasmosis, etc.)	7
Respiratory illness (influenza, COVID, pneumonia, etc.)	347
Vectorborne - insects (West Nile Virus, tularemia, RMSF, etc.)	10
Total Case Investigations	469
Total Disease Reports	1299

SWNPHD monitors reportable diseases to identify possible causes and protect communities from outbreaks. In 2024-2025 there were 1,299 disease reports and staff completed 469 follow-up investigations.

Teamwork on Tuberculosis

In 2024-2025 our district was notified of an active tuberculosis (TB) case. This is a contagious respiratory disease that can spread to those in close contact such as family members. This is a very treatable disease and with the assistance of multiple partners and medical providers we were able to contain the situation and get medication to the active case and those who were exposed and converted to latent TB (the illness is detected in your body, but you are not actively sick). A total of six people were treated. Although TB is rare in southwest Nebraska we continue to monitor for this disease.

Environmental Public Health

Radon



Radon is a radioactive gas that comes from uranium in the ground, which is common in Nebraska. Radon can cause lung cancer if it builds up in people's homes and they are exposed for a long time. SWNPHD provides information on radon, how to test your home, and how to lower your radon level if it is high. 60 radon test kits were given out along with referrals to licensed radon professionals.

SWNPHD hosts a Radon Poster Contest each year for students aged 9 to 14. This year 8 teachers taught their class about radon and 227 students submitted posters. The winning posters were used to make educational brochures for their communities.



Hitchcock County Radon Poster Contest Winners

Air Quality



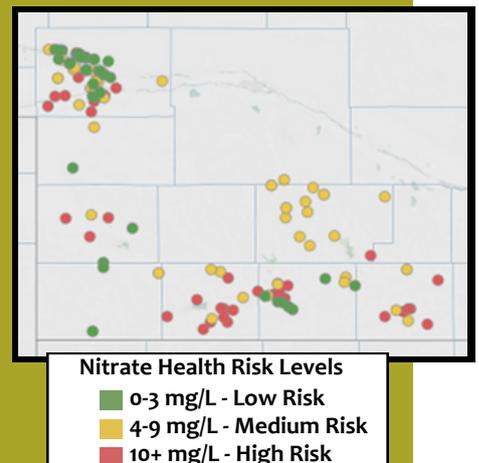
In FY25, Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department (SWNPHD) successfully installed PurpleAir monitors in all nine counties we serve. These real-time air quality sensors measure fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), allowing residents to access current air quality conditions through the SWNPHD website or the PurpleAir online map. This effort directly supports Healthy People 2030 Objective EH-01, which aims to reduce the number of days people are exposed to unhealthy air. By providing accurate, localized data, our community members can make informed decisions to protect their health—such as limiting outdoor activity on high-pollution days. The expansion of our air monitoring network strengthens regional public health preparedness and reinforces SWNPHD's long-term commitment to environmental health and wellness.

Private Wells

Clean water is essential for everyday activities like cooking, cleaning, and drinking. Unlike public water systems, private wells are not regulated, so it's important for well owners to regularly test their water.

One of the most common contaminants in Nebraska is nitrate, which often enters groundwater through agricultural sources such as fertilizers, pesticides, and animal waste. To support well owners, SWNPHD offers free nitrate and nitrite test strips each year in September and May. In FY25 a total of 144 private wells were tested. About one-third had nitrate levels above the maximum safe limit of 10 mg/L. Another third had levels between 3–10 mg/L, a range that recent studies suggest may still pose health risks.

Well Testing Nitrate Results
2024-2025



Promoting Lead Screening to Protect Children's Health



Lead exposure poses serious risks to children's health, including developmental delays, learning difficulties, and behavioral issues. In FY25, 247 children in Southwest Nebraska were screened for lead—up from 187 in FY24—highlighting growing awareness about the importance of early detection. Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department (SWNPHD) played a key role in this progress by continuing to provide education and guidance to healthcare providers and child caregivers on the importance of lead screening and prevention. We worked with all the birthing hospitals in our district to start distributing lead screening information to new parents prior to leaving the hospital.

During the year, SWNPHD investigated 10 cases of elevated blood lead levels in children, including two in-home environmental investigations conducted in partnership with the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). To further support community health, SWNPHD purchased two LeadCare II machines, allowing lead screenings to now be offered at both of our office locations in McCook and Ogallala. These tools will support local partners in increasing screening accessibility as we work together to reduce childhood lead exposure across Southwest Nebraska.

Reducing Tobacco Use

Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department (SWNPHD) continues its commitment to reducing tobacco use across the region. This year, we aimed to increase community awareness about the dangers of tobacco and nicotine products, particularly targeting youth and underserved populations. The project aligns with the Healthy People 2030 objective of reducing current tobacco use among adolescents and adults. A key indicator of success will be measurable increases in community awareness about the health risks associated with tobacco use and the resources available to help individuals quit.

To meet these goals, SWNPHD has launched several outreach and educational initiatives focused on prevention and cessation. The overarching project objective is to reduce tobacco and nicotine product use among vulnerable groups, such as youth, low-income individuals, and those with behavioral health needs. Through community partnerships, educational campaigns, and evidence-based strategies, SWNPHD is working to create a healthier environment that supports tobacco-free lifestyles.

Vector-borne Disease

SWNPHD participated in Nebraska's West Nile Virus Program to trap and test mosquitoes from June 1st until the end of September or the first hard freeze. Mosquitoes are trapped every other week and sent to the state laboratory for testing. If any mosquito tests positive for West Nile Virus, the public is notified and encouraged to prevent mosquito bites. SWNPHD had no positive mosquitoes in the 2024 season.



Environmental Complaints

The environments we live in play a vital role in our physical and mental well-being. Factors such as air and water quality, housing conditions, noise levels, green spaces, and waste management all contribute to community health. When environmental conditions negatively affect health, residents can report concerns to the public health department.

Although Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department (SWNPHD) does not have legal authority to enforce environmental regulations, all complaints are documented and investigated by public health staff. In fiscal year 2025, SWNPHD responded to eight environmental complaints. These included issues such as excess garbage or animal waste, pests, mold, water quality concerns, and health inspection requests. For each complaint, SWNPHD provided information on:

- Relevant local ordinances
- The agency responsible for enforcement
- Recommended action steps
- Any resolutions or outcomes

This process helps ensure that community members are informed and supported in addressing environmental health concerns.

Promoting Healthy Lifestyles

Walk to Health

Walk to Health is a free walking program that encourages people to better their health by increasing their physical activity. This year had 4 different challenges. The 12-week team walking challenge had 129 participants. Prizes were given to the team with the most steps.

Thanks to Community Hospital of McCook, participants can track their steps through an app called Be Well. This year Be Well was a new app that people from the district used to track their steps. Challenges were a little different this year due to the new app, but participants got the same active results. Another new initiative had staff approach all the area hospitals to donate prizes for the challenges. Tri Valley Health System, Dundy County Hospital, and Chase County Hospital and Clinic all agreed to provide prizes.



Kids Fitness

Nebraska Kids Fitness & Nutrition Day is a one-day event for 4th grade students in the district. This day is filled with 6 nutrition stations and 13 fitness stations. Across the district this day is held in 2 locations. One location is in McCook at the McCook Community College Peter and Delores Graff Event Center with 253 students attending. The second location was held in Grant at Perkins County School with 176 students attending. This fun day would not have been possible without the many sponsors and the help of 100 volunteers between the two locations. Nutrition Stations teach information about portion sizes, how to read labels, and how to have good eating habits. Fitness stations teach students the benefit of exercise for healthy living and that fitness can be fun.

4th graders in a human knot at the McCook event

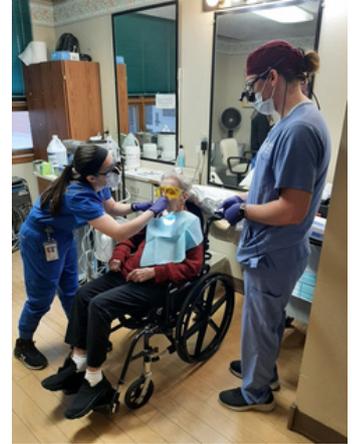


KIDS
FITNESS
and
NUTRITION
DAY

Polish Your Pearls

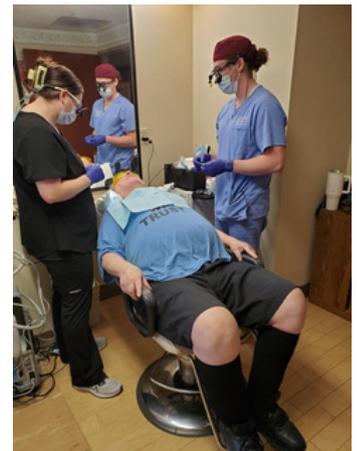


Polish your Pearls is a grant-based dental program implemented by SWNPHD that helps supplement regular dental visits to provide optimal protection against cavities for children. This program is available to local daycares and schools to provide oral health screening, dental education, application of fluoride varnish and sealants. Polish Your Pearls has provided dental services in 8 of the 9 counties in the district. With no dental providers in the district accepting new Medicaid patients, it has been very challenging for many children to be seen or even treated by a dentist. Polish your Pearls sees children in many schools, HeadStart's and preschools in all 9 counties we serve.



Residents of Hillcrest Nursing Home getting dental services at their facility in McCook

Long Term Care residents also have a hard time being seen or treated by a dentist. With the help of grant funding, Polish Your Pearls has purchased portable equipment to be able to go into Long Term Care Facilities to help residents with dental screenings, dental cleaning, dental education, fluoride varnish, silver diamine fluoride applications, and denture cleanings. Polish Your Pearls has been able to see residents in 9 facilities, with hopes of expanding to more facilities this year.



Furnas County kids learning about sun safety at Oxford pool

Pool Cool

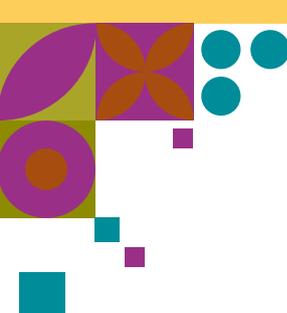
The Pool Cool program works with local swimming pools to provide education about sun safety during their swimming lessons. Twelve pools in the district agreed to teach the Pool Cool lessons. Each pool that participates in the program was given a gallon of sunscreen, educational posters, and all the materials needed to teach the eight safety lessons. Pools were asked to provide pictures of the swimming lessons being taught. After completion of the program, those pools were awarded \$250 and a certificate thanking them for helping to prevent skin cancer in their community.

Behavioral Health and Substance Use



Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department (SWNPHD) is expanding mental health support through a partnership with CredibleMind, giving over 38,000 residents free 24/7 access to digital mental wellness tools. The platform offers science-based resources that focus on early intervention, self-care, and prevention. It also helps educate the public about the link between substance use and mental health, particularly how opioids can increase the risk of depression, anxiety, and trauma. This effort supports national health goals like reducing opioid-related deaths (Healthy People 2030 Objective IVP-20) and increasing treatment access for people with co-occurring disorders (MHMD-07).

In the first half of the year, nearly 900 users accessed the platform, showing strong interest in depression and anxiety topics. One self-assessment—"Are Your Off Days a Sign of Depression?"—was completed almost 200 times. However, a drop in session time suggests the need for improved navigation. SWNPHD also teamed up with Region II Human Services to turn low-attendance in-person forums into more successful virtual meetings. These quarterly sessions bring together schools, providers, and community members to promote early intervention, reduce stigma, and improve access to mental health and substance use services. Together, these digital and community-driven efforts aim to build a healthier, more connected region.



Respite

Taking care of yourself is one of the best ways to help your loved ones. Respite care provides short-term, temporary relief to those who are caring for family members with special needs or chronic illnesses. We try to provide a positive experience for the person receiving care. SWNPHD hosts the Southwest Service Area of Nebraska Lifespan Respite Network.

We currently have 9 families enrolled for services and 7 registered providers to step in and provide much-needed respite care. Throughout the year, we organize at least 2 events where respite families can bring their family member needing care and use that time to take care of themselves. One of these events was held in Trenton. All those that attended were guided through painting a predetermined picture on canvas while enjoying good company.



Respite event in Trenton NE



SWNPHD Awarded NDOT Mini-Grant for Roadway Safety



Nebraska Department of Transportation awarded SWNPHD a mini grant to reduce occupant protection-related injuries and fatalities in Nebraska. This grant was awarded to support youth and adult seatbelt use, and reduce drowsy, distracted, and impaired driving with education and awareness. SWNPHD has been sharing the facts by placing table tents on restaurant tables, social media ads, billboards, and banners at area fairs. We have also placed yard signs around the district to remind people to not drive impaired or without a seat belt.

Rural Resources

Nebraska Medicaid companies including Nebraska Total Care and United Healthcare established funding to build resources and referral systems. Rural Medicaid members often have difficulty getting what they need to be healthy. This can be having to travel for medical care, unreliable transportation, limited time off to travel to appointments, lack of childcare, and many other factors. SWNPHD worked to strengthen the referral process between healthcare and social services and collected a list of over 200 of the resources available in the health district.



Minority Health Initiative

The Minority Health Initiative (MHI) works to reduce health disparities and improve health outcomes across our communities. Through partnerships with local hospitals, clinics, ag businesses, UNL Extension, and other community organizations, the program provides preventive care education, health screenings, and resources to connect residents with ongoing medical support. This year, MHI hosted free health screenings in Chase, Perkins, Red Willow, Keith, and Hayes Counties. Screenings included cholesterol and glucose checks, blood pressure monitoring, flu vaccinations, and education on healthy living. Participants were also connected with medical homes and other supportive services.

In collaboration with UNL Extension, MHI offered monthly Healthy Cooking Classes at the 4-H Building in Hayes Center. These classes featured hands-on learning about nutrition and food safety, including label reading, safe cooking temperatures, healthy quick meals, candy making, safe canning, healthy breakfasts, and strategies for reducing calories by making healthier substitutions.



IMMUNIZATIONS

Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department works to increase vaccination rates, reduce the spread of preventable diseases, and protect people with low immune systems like infants and seniors.

Services Provided

ROUTINE VACCINATIONS

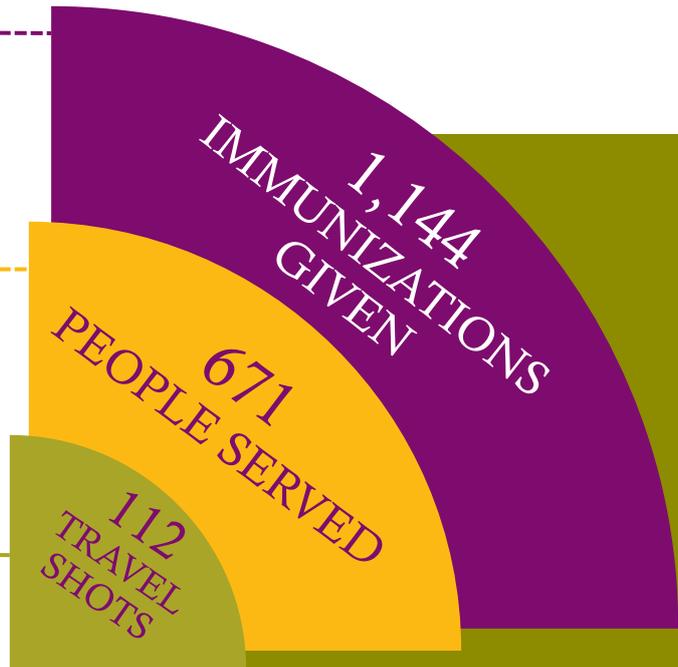
We provide recommended routine immunizations for all ages.

COMMUNITY CLINICS

We hold vaccination clinics in local schools and businesses to make it easier to get recommended vaccinations.

SPECIALTY VACCINES

We order specialty vaccines for people traveling out of the country and for veterinary students who need rabies vaccination for school.



Programs

Vaccines for Children

State-funded vaccine for children with no insurance, or whose insurance doesn't cover immunizations.

Insurance Billing for Vaccines

Private-funded vaccine for children and adults with insurance that covers immunizations, or who pay directly for specialty vaccines.

Vaccines for Adults

Limited selection of state-funded vaccine for adults with no insurance, including tetanus, hepatitis, and influenza.



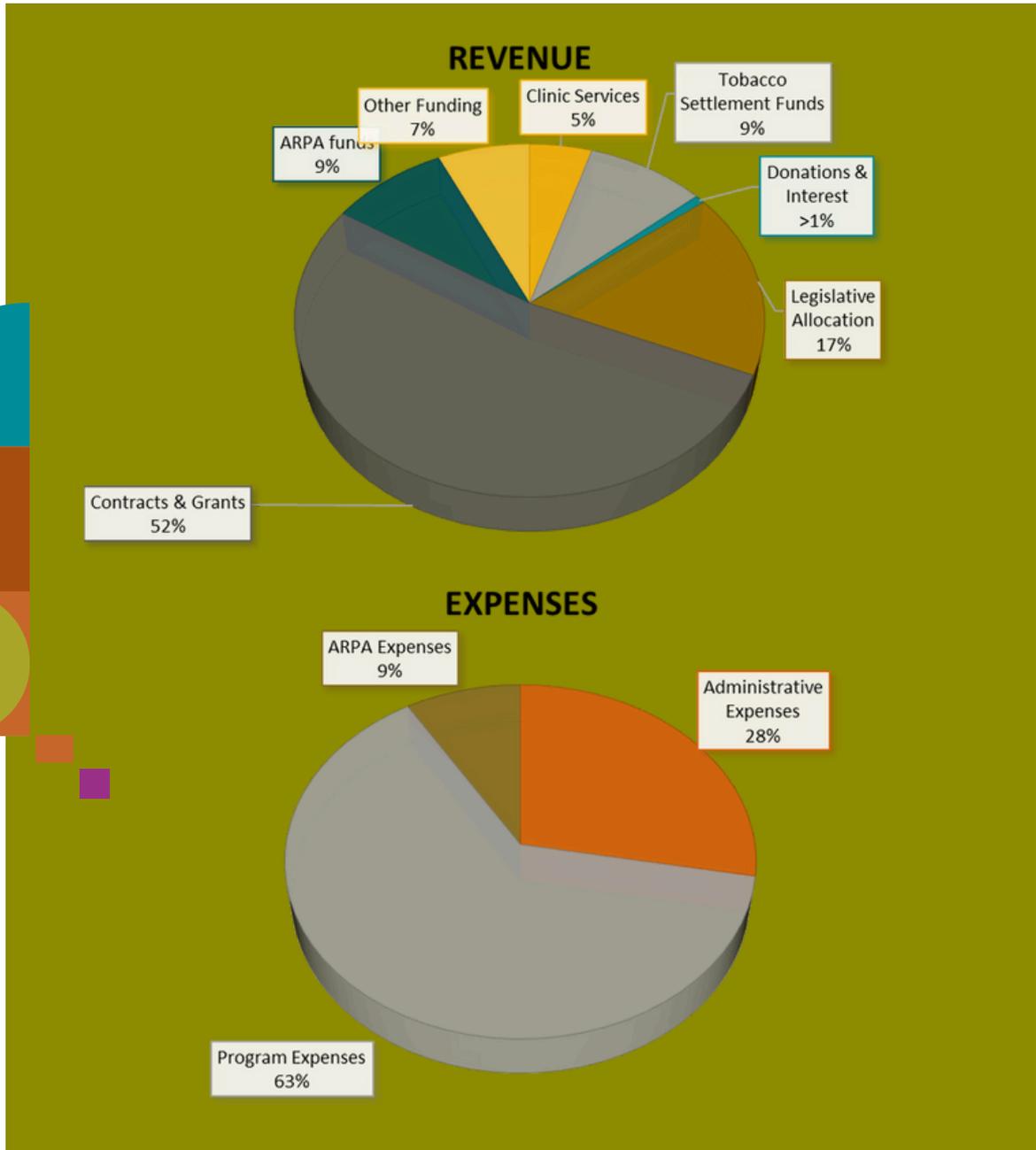
Scan here to look up your immunization record!



Financial Report

July 2024 - June 2025 Unaudited

At SWNPHD we are committed to financial responsibility and stewardship of our resources. We allocate funds to support essential public health services in the nine counties we serve in southwest Nebraska.



Total Revenue

\$1,776,485



Total Expenses

\$1,606,735



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