



NEWS RELEASE



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For information contact: Shawna Rhine, Community Outreach Coordinator/Public Information Officer
Southern 7 Health Department & Head Start

Office: 618-626-2355 Cell: 618-614-9223 Southern 7 Central Office: 618-634-2297 Email: srhine@s7hd.org

(6/26/24) Southern 7 Health Department Celebrates 45th Anniversary

The mission of Southern 7 Health Department (S7HD) is to promote a safe and healthy environment by providing preventive health care, family support services, and child development programs. On July 1, the staff at S7HD will celebrate its 45th anniversary not just by looking back at fond memories and celebrating the present, but by focusing on the perseverance and dedication it takes to continue their mission into the future.

On July 1, 1979, Southern 7 Health Department was formed, but its history goes back much further with the first minutes of meetings on file as early as the 1930's. At that meeting, personnel from the state level and the local communities were collaborating to provide safe drinking water, communicable disease control, and healthy pregnancy.

Although its approaches are now broader, and techniques are much more refined, the goal has remained constant; to protect the public's health. "The agency operates to protect the health of the public from the womb to the tomb", said Rhonda Andrews-Ray, S7HD Executive Director/Public Health Administrator. "It educates our little ones and gives them an advantage in school and in life. It is the smile of a 3-year old when they see their teacher. It is a family enjoying a birthday party at a restaurant that is clean and safe. It is a new, scared mother who needs to know how to feed her baby. It is a person who is given a FIT test and is saved from cancer."

As an agency, S7HD had its start in 1945 when a Bi-County Defense Zone Health Department was created for Alexander and Pulaski Counties. Then in 1946, a referendum vote for a Bi-County Health Department was favorably approved by the local residents. In that same year, the counties of Johnson, Massac, Pope, and Hardin also voted in a referendum for the creation of a Quadri-County Health Department.

In 1958, again by a vote of the people, Union County established the desire to have a health department and was then invited to join with the already functioning Bi-County Health Department to form what became known as Tri-County Health Department. The two departments (Tri-County and Quadri-County) operated separately until 1979 when they decided to legally consolidate, mainly due to economy of scale. As a result, Southern 7 Health Department, as it is now known, was created and continues to serve residents of Alexander, Hardin, Johnson, Massac, Pope, Pulaski, and Union counties.

As required by the Illinois Statutes, the agency, which currently employs 190 persons, is governed by a twenty-eight member Board of Health (four from each county) which is appointed by the county commissioners. The Southern 7 Health Department jurisdiction covers 2,003 square miles, which is slightly larger than the entire state of Delaware. It is the largest geographical health department in Illinois and yet, is also one of the most rural departments in the state. According to the 2020 census, the population for the seven counties was just over 62,000.

Funding for the agency comes from a variety of sources including local tax dollars from each of the counties, the Illinois Department of Public Health, a variety of state and federally funded grant programs, and charged fees for many of its services. However, no one is denied basic public health services due to inability to pay.

Each Southern 7 public health clinic provides a wide-range of services that include public health and cancer screenings and testing, maternal child health and WIC, health education, communicable disease management and immunizations, and environmental health services. Through its Wellness on Wheels (WOW) Mobile Unit, many services are now available for residents in the most rural parts of the Southern 7 Health Department region.

In addition to providing health services, Southern 7 Health Department is home to the region's Medical Reserve Corp (MRC); a group of locally organized healthcare and non-healthcare volunteers working to strengthen the health and safety of the region.

In 1993, S7HD was granted the seven county federal Head Start program. The addition of this program greatly expanded its capabilities, size, and ability to reach and serve the entire seven county population. Currently, Southern 7 Head Start is funded to support a combined 392 children and their families through its Early and Traditional Head Start programs with services that include school readiness, hearing, vision, and dental screenings, developmental screenings, family health and education information, and healthy meals.

To learn more about Southern 7 Health Department and Head Start, visit southern7.org, download the Southern 7 app, or call 618-634-2297.

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