Pinal County ranks last in doctor ratios, work commutes
By Kevin Reagan Staff Writer | March 21, 2019 | Casa Grande Dispatch
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CASA GRANDE — Data released this week shows Pinal County has the worst ratio in Arizona for primary care doctors per capita.

The University of Wisconsin’s Population Health Institute recently released its annual rankings of the healthiest counties in Arizona. Based on a number of health factors, Pinal County ranked seventh — a few spots down from the fourth ranking it held in 2017.

Higher rates of adult obesity, air pollution and sexually transmitted diseases were a couple factors observed in Pinal County, which the Health Institute calculated through more than 50 sources of public data.

The county has continued to not show improvement in its number of licensed primary care physicians. According to the Health Institute, Pinal County has had the largest ratio of primary care doctors per capita in Arizona for the last few years.

Sixty-five primary care doctors were listed as working in Pinal County — a lower number than surrounding counties with smaller populations. Yuma County was listed as having 84 doctors and Mohave County had 94.

Dr. Shauna McIsaac, Pinal County’s director of public health, said she wasn’t surprised to see the data on doctor ratios. The shortage of health providers has been known for a while, she said, since many residents travel to Maricopa or Pima counties for health care.

Sun Life Family Health Center, which operates several clinics around Pinal County, agrees there’s been a drop in doctor ratios. But Kim Collins, Sun Life’s chief operations officer, told Pinal Central health care is not being compromised because more nurse practitioners have entered the workforce.

The Health Institute’s definition of primary care doctors does not include nurse practitioners or physician assistants, who also provide primary care services to patients.

This may explain why numbers contained in a 2017 health assessment on Pinal County differ from the Health Institute’s. According to the assessment, which was done by the Pinal County Public Health Department and Banner Health, the county had one primary care provider for every 944 residents — a ratio still three times larger than the state’s average. The Health Institute’s ratio was one primary care physician for every 6,439 residents. Coconino County had a ratio of one physician for every 1,200 residents.

Several areas of Pinal County have been designated by the federal government as being medically under-served. These include Eloy, Coolidge, Maricopa and Apache Junction.

The University of Arizona’s Center for Rural Health estimates Pinal County needs to recruit at least 64 more primary care providers in order to meet its current demand.
“That’s a pretty big shortage,” said Dr. Daniel Derksen, director of the Center for Rural Health. An aging doctor population and low salaries are some reasons the center believes Arizona doesn’t have enough primary care physicians.

Derksen added that the number of residency slots for medical students is limited in Arizona, so many must go out-of-state to complete their training.

“Once people leave, they don’t come back, unfortunately,” Derksen said.

A bill was recently introduced in the Arizona Senate that would infuse more money from the general fund to fix the state’s doctor shortage.

The Health Institute’s annual rankings also examined quality-of-life factors that may negatively impact a person’s health. For example, Pinal County was found to have the highest percentage of residents who must drive alone to work for more than 30 minutes.

The institute said it collected this data because long commutes have been found to cause high blood pressure and obesity. Fifty-two percent of Pinal residents reported having long work commutes — a rate much higher than Pima and Maricopa counties.

McIsaac said Pinal County is beginning to incorporate public health into community planning as a strategy to get more residents physically active.

Many areas of the county require a car to get from one place to another, the director said, so planners are looking at designing communities that allow and encourage residents to walk more.

The Health Institute report shows Pinal County has seen fewer teen pregnancies and adult smokers in the last couple of years.

Pinal County ranked last in the state by having one doctor for every 6,440 residents. Darker blue indicates worse ratios of primary care physicians to population.

RWJ County Health Rankings and Roadmaps 2019.
University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute:
http://www.countyhealthrankings.org