



Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department

2025-2026

ANNUAL REPORT

Working together for healthier communities across
Southwest Nebraska.



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

Flexible
Equity
Integrity
Empowering

Board of Health

Local leadership guiding public health across southwest Nebraska.

Chase County

Jacci Brown
Dawn Weber

Furnas County

Mike Sexton
John Kutnink

Keith County

Joan Ervin
Brian Wilson

Dundy County

Sye Tecker
Jeremiah Hanes

Hayes County

Kevin Fornoff
Leon Kolbet

Perkins County

Mark Bottom
Laurie Walrod

Frontier County

Kevin Owens
Erin Pascoe

Hitchcock County

Ron Wertz
Darcie Johnson

Red Willow County

Ted Gans
Janelle Carter

Physician

Shiuvaun Jaeger, MD

Dentist

Scott Tobias, DDS

STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC HEALTH

Building stronger systems to better serve our communities

A Milestone for Southwest Nebraska

In November 2025, Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department became officially accredited through the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB).

Accreditation shows that SWNPHD meets nationally recognized standards for quality, accountability, and best practices in public health.

This milestone followed several years of reviewing and improving policies, submitting documentation, and completing a PHAB site visit. Accreditation is not the end of the process. SWNPHD continues to review feedback, strengthen our work, and maintain the standards that help us provide high-quality programs and services to our communities.

PHAB Accredited • November 2025



What Accreditation Means for You

- ✓ **National Standards**
- ✓ **Accountability**
- ✓ **Quality**
- ✓ **Continuous Improvement**

Local Data. Better Decisions.



Emergency
Department Visits



School
Absences



Wastewater
Testing



Weekly Illness Report

Alerts SWNPHD and partners to know when to increase prevention, prepare for possible outbreaks, and respond to changing community needs.

Continuous Improvement in Action

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) helps SWNPHD use data, review our processes, and find ways to better serve our communities. This year's CQI project focused on improving how we monitor and share information about illnesses in our district.

SWNPHD now provides weekly illness reports using local health data. These reports help SWNPHD and community partners track respiratory and stomach illness trends and respond to changing health needs across the district.

CHILDHOOD LEAD POISONING PREVENTION

Finding risks early. Creating safer homes for children.



Lead Screening and Surveillance

Lead poisoning often has no obvious symptoms, making routine blood lead screening an important tool for identifying children who may be at risk. During FY26, 289 children across Southwest Nebraska were screened for lead by healthcare providers and reported to Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department through Nebraska's childhood lead surveillance program. Staff investigated 16 cases of elevated blood lead levels, working with families and healthcare providers to identify potential sources of exposure and provide education on reducing lead hazards.

To further support prevention efforts, SWNPHD provided lead dust cleanup kits to families whose children had repeated elevated blood lead levels and continues expanding access to screening by offering capillary (fingerstick) lead testing at both the McCook and Ogallala offices. Through surveillance, education, investigations, and increased screening opportunities, SWNPHD is helping identify children at risk and connect families with resources that prevent future lead exposure.



New HUD Lead Hazard Reduction Program

Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department was excited to receive a HUD Lead Hazard Reduction Grant to help protect young children from the dangers of lead-based paint. Through this program, trained staff use specialized X-ray fluorescence (XRF) technology to identify lead-based paint hazards in homes built before 1978 where children under six live or spend significant time.

During the program, SWNPHD will work with eligible families to identify and reduce lead hazards in 20 homes across southwest Nebraska at no cost to the family. By finding and addressing these hazards early, the program helps prevent childhood lead poisoning and creates healthier, safer homes where children can grow and thrive.



HELPING COMMUNITIES BREATHE EASIER

Protecting the air we breathe - inside and out.



We notify the community when air quality reaches the Orange level or higher.

Outdoor Air Quality Monitoring

Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department continues to monitor outdoor air quality across all nine counties using the PurpleAir monitoring network installed throughout the district. Residents can check current air quality conditions on the SWNPHD website before spending time outdoors. This helps them decide when it's safe to work, exercise, play, or enjoy time outside.

Throughout the year, SWNPHD provided education about the importance of checking local air quality and shared public alerts when air quality reached levels that could affect sensitive groups, including children, older adults, and people with heart or lung conditions. By promoting awareness and encouraging simple precautions on poor air quality days, SWNPHD helps protect the health of residents and supports healthier communities across southwest Nebraska.

Check the Air Before You Spend Time Outside!



Scan here to view today's air quality

101 Radon Test Kits Distributed in FY26



Pictured: Joy Trail, Senior Program Manager and Leah Messinger, 2nd place 2026 Radon Poster Contest winner from St. Pats school

Creating Healthier Homes

Radon is an invisible radioactive gas that can build up inside homes and is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States. Throughout the year, Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department helped residents learn about radon through community education, free radon test kits, and referrals to licensed radon professionals. SWNPHD also provided education to schools, real estate professionals, building inspectors, and community partners across the district.

Students also played an important role in raising awareness through the annual Radon Poster Contest. This year, 194 students submitted posters promoting radon awareness and the importance of home testing. Together, these efforts help families understand the risks of radon and take simple steps to create healthier homes.

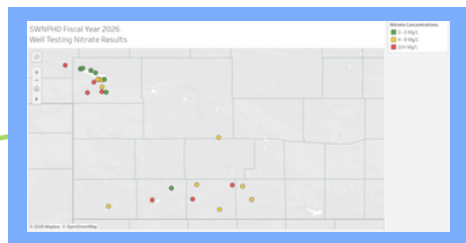
Scan to request your FREE radon test kit



Test Your Home for Radon

PROTECTING HEALTH EVERY DAY

Reducing risks where we live, work, travel, and play.



Know What's in Your Water

Many rural families rely on private wells for drinking water. SWNPHD provides free nitrate and nitrite test strips to help well owners better understand their water quality.

In FY26, 35 private wells were tested. About one-third had nitrate levels above the maximum safe limit of 10 mg/L. Any level above 3 mg/L may pose health risks. These results show why regular testing is important in helping families understand what is in their drinking water.

35 Wells Tested

Watching for West Nile



During mosquito season, SWNPHD collects mosquitoes every other week from three surveillance sites in Red Willow County and sends them for West Nile Virus testing. When the virus is found, SWNPHD alerts the public and shares ways residents can prevent mosquito bites.

TRAP → TEST → ALERT

Sun Safety



9 Participating Pools

SWNPHD partnered with nine local pools to bring sun-safety education into swimming lessons, helping children build healthy habits early to prevent skin cancer.

Building sun-safe habits early

Clean Hands, Healthy Kids



12 Schools Reached

SWNPHD and Nebraska Extension partnered to bring interactive handwashing education to 12 schools during FY26, helping students learn how proper handwashing can prevent the spread of illness.

Healthy habits through partnership

Safer Choices on the Road



SWNPHD promoted seat belt use and safer driving through community outreach across the district.

NDOT
Highway Safety Office

**BUCKLE UP • PHONE DOWN •
DRIVE SOBER**

PREPARING WATCHING RESPONDING

Protecting southwest Nebraska before, during, and after public health threats.

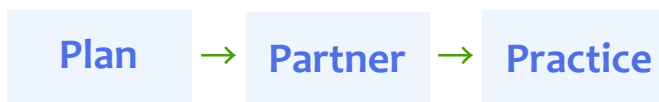
PREPARING

Ready When It Matters

Public health emergencies can take many forms, from severe weather and disease outbreaks to events that interrupt access to essential services. SWNPHD works year-round to strengthen the systems, partnerships, and plans needed to respond when our communities are affected.

Preparedness happens before an emergency begins

Staff participate in regional planning, trainings, exercises, and coordination with hospitals, emergency managers, schools, state partners, and other local agencies. This work helps clarify roles, strengthen communication, and identify resources that may be needed during a response.

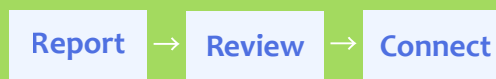


SWNPHD also maintains plans for public health response activities, including disease control and the distribution of medications or medical supplies when needed. Regular review and practice help ensure those plans can be put into action quickly and effectively.

RESPONDING

When Concerns Are Reported

During FY26, SWNPHD responded to 5 environmental health complaints from residents throughout the district. Concerns are documented and reviewed to determine what information, follow-up, or referral may be appropriate.



Depending on the issue, staff may provide education, recommend next steps, or connect residents with the agency responsible for additional investigation or enforcement. This helps community members know where to turn when something in their environment may affect their health.



WATCHING

Disease Surveillance

1055	262
Diseases Reported	Cases Investigated

SWNPHD monitors reportable diseases, investigates cases, and watches for patterns that may signal increased risk of an outbreak.

Disease Report	Number of Cases
Animal Exposure (bite or non-bite)	31
Bloodborne & Invasive (hepatitis, etc.)	8
Foodborne, Enteric (salmonella, Ecoli, campylobacter, etc.)	70
Lead Poisoning	16
Parasitic & Fungal (toxoplasmosis, histoplasmosis, etc.)	2
Respiratory illness (Influenza, COVID, pneumonia, etc.)	125
Vectorborne, insects (West Nile Virus, tularemia, RMSF, etc.)	10

ANOTHER WAY WE WATCH

What Wastewater Can Tell Us

Wastewater surveillance gives SWNPHD another way to understand illness activity in the community. Weekly monitoring in McCook can identify changes in respiratory viruses circulating locally, even when people do not seek medical care or testing.

Wastewater data are reviewed alongside other local indicators and help provide a broader picture of what may be happening in the community. This information supports the weekly illness reports SWNPHD shares with community partners and helps guide prevention messaging when illness activity changes.

INFLUENZA A & B • COVID - 19 • RSV



Partnering with Families from the Very Beginning

Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department proudly became an affiliated Healthy Families America® site in September 2025 through funding from the Nebraska Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program. During the year, staff completed extensive training, developed program policies, established referral partnerships, and formed a Community Advisory Board to help guide the program and ensure it meets the needs of families across southwest Nebraska.

Healthy Families Nebraska-Southwest began welcoming families into the program in March 2026, with the first family enrolling in June. HFASW is a free, voluntary, evidence-based home visiting program for expectant parents and families with young children. Families receive personalized support, parenting education, child development guidance, and connections to community resources. Together, we partner with families to build confidence, support healthy child development, and create a strong foundation for lifelong success.

Ready to Learn More?

Healthy Families Nebraska-Southwest

- Free and voluntary
- Serving families in all nine counties
- Pregnancy through early childhood
- Personalized home visits based on each family's goals
- Parenting support and child development

Scan to make
a referral



Visit: www.swhealth.ne.gov

Call: 308-345-4223

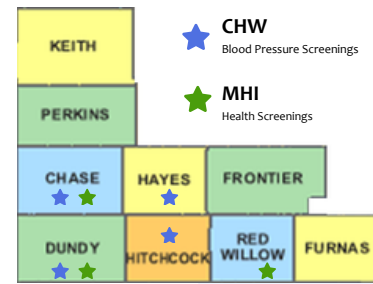
BRINGING HEALTH CLOSER TO HOME

Making preventive health services easier to access

Connecting Communities to Better Health

Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department's Community Health Worker (CHW) brings health education, screenings, resources, and connections to services directly into communities across the nine-county district. By meeting people where they are, the CHW helps make preventive health services easier to access.

In June 2026, SWNPHD launched a new series of free community blood pressure clinics, holding five clinics in Dundy, Hayes, Chase, and Hitchcock Counties during the first month. Residents received free blood pressure checks, learned what their numbers mean, and received information about regular monitoring and additional resources when needed. The early clinics provided a starting point for expanding preventive health services throughout the district.



A community member receives a free blood pressure check during one of SWNPHD's new community clinics.

NEW

Launched June 2026



4

Counties Reached



5

Community clinics



Minority Health Initiative

Expanding Access to Preventive Care

105

Participants Reached




Blood Pressure




Cholesterol




Blood Sugar

Through the Minority Health Initiative (MHI), SWNPHD works with local partners to reduce health disparities and connect residents with preventive care and ongoing health resources. This year, free health screenings were offered in Chase, Red Willow, and Dundy Counties.

Screenings included cholesterol, blood sugar, and blood pressure checks, along with healthy living education. Partnerships with local hospitals, clinics, agricultural businesses, and UNL Extension helped bring these services closer to residents in their own communities.



Community partnerships help bring preventive health services closer to home.

MOVING OUR COMMUNITIES TOWARD BETTER HEALTH



Walk to Health

Walk to Health is a free community walking program that encourages people of all ages to stay active and improve their health. Participants complete four walking challenges each year and track their progress using the Be Well app, thanks to support from Community Hospital.



This year, 173 people participated in the Walk to Health events, averaging 2,334 steps per person each day. Since joining the Be Well app last year, participants have logged more than 66.4 million steps, showing how small daily habits can improve health and help build a more active community.



173

Walk to Health Participants



66.4

Million Steps Logged



Community members participating in the 5K



Running for Health - and Helping Others

Throughout the year, SWNPHD encouraged people to stay active through social media, wellness messages, bilingual educational materials, and community events.

A new 5K Glow Run in Benkelman brought together about 50 participants from four counties for an evening of fun and fitness. Instead of paying an entry fee, participants donated non-perishable food items to the Benkelman Food Pantry, combining exercise with giving back to the community. The family-friendly event encouraged healthy habits, brought people together, and supported neighbors in need.

50

Glow Run Participants



4

Counties Represented



100%

Food Donations Stayed Local



HEALTHY AT EVERY AGE

Supporting healthier choices through every stage of life

Eat Well

Practical Skills for Healthier Eating

SWNPHD hosted nutrition education across the district to help residents make healthier food choices and lower their risk for chronic disease. Classes taught practical skills such as reading food labels, selecting healthier snacks, limiting sodium, fat, and added sugar, and preparing simple meals.

These everyday skills help make healthy eating easier to understand and put into practice.



Participants practice healthy meal preparation during a nutrition class.

Move More

Staying Active, Strong, & Independent

Through a partnership with UNL Extension, SWNPHD offered virtual Stay Active & Independent for Life (SAIL) classes. Gentle exercise and stretching helped participants improve strength and balance, reduce the risk of falls, and stay active as they age.



Stay Connected

Supporting Healthy Aging Together

The Southwest Nebraska Dementia Coalition brings together community partners to strengthen resources for older adults, caregivers, and families. The coalition supports education about dementia, brain health, and healthy aging while helping identify needs and connect residents with available resources.

Community partners come together through the Dementia Coalition to support healthy aging.



Know Your Numbers

Building Skills to Manage Your Health

Through the Preventive Health Grant, SWNPHD offers free Living Well classes for people with long-term health conditions and those who help care for them. Participants learn practical skills to set healthy goals, eat well, stay active, manage pain, and communicate with their healthcare providers.

Living Well with High Blood Pressure classes also helped residents better understand and manage their blood pressure.

FREE 6-Week Classes

Learn • Practice • Build Confidence

Small choices today can support better health for years to come.

CARE WHERE IT'S NEEDED

Bringing preventive care closer to the people who need it.

HEALTHY SMILES

Prevention Across Generations

Polish Your Pearls brings preventive dental care directly to children across southwest Nebraska through partnerships with local schools, daycares, and preschools. During FY26, 1,152 children received services including oral health screenings, education, fluoride varnish, and dental sealants.

Access to dental care remains a challenge in the region, with no Medicaid dental providers currently available within the district. By bringing services to places children already learn and play, SWNPHD helps families overcome barriers to preventive oral health care.

Polish Your Pearls



Southwest Nebraska
Public Health Department

Oral Health at Every Age

Polish Your Pearls also brings dental services directly to residents of long-term care facilities. Using portable dental equipment, staff provide screenings, professional cleanings, oral health education, fluoride varnish, Silver Diamine Fluoride treatments, and denture cleanings. During FY26, 35 long-term care residents received dental services at participating facilities.

1,152

Children Received
Preventive Dental Services



35

Long-term Care Residents
Received Dental Services



PROTECTED TOGETHER

Making Immunizations Easier to Access

SWNPHD helps protect communities by making recommended vaccines easier to access. During FY26, 553 people received immunizations through SWNPHD, with 796 vaccines administered. Staff also held 40 outlying clinics, bringing immunization services closer to residents throughout the nine-county district.

SWNPHD offers free Vaccines for Children (VFC) and Vaccines for Adults (VFA) for those who qualify, along with vaccines that can be billed to private insurance. These services help residents protect themselves, their families, and their communities from vaccine-preventable diseases.



553

People Immunized



796

Vaccines Given



40

Outlying Clinics

SUPPORTING HEALTHY MINDS

Prevention, connection, and resources for healthier communities.

CredibleMind

Mental Health Resources at Your Fingertips

Mental health resources should be easy to find when they are needed. SWNPHD continues to offer CredibleMind, a free online resource connecting residents with scientifically backed information and self-care tools, including videos, podcasts, apps, articles, and more.

This year, 996 people visited the site. Among users who reported their age, approximately half were between 13 and 24 years old. Depression and anxiety were the topics users explored most often.

996
people visited CredibleMind

Explore CredibleMind
Free mental health and self-care resources available anytime




swhealth.crediblemind.com

Tobacco & Nicotine Prevention

Helping Build Tobacco-Free Communities

SWNPHD works to reduce tobacco and nicotine use through education, prevention, and community partnerships. Efforts focus on increasing awareness of health risks, supporting tobacco-free environments, and connecting residents with resources for healthier choices.

Prevention efforts also focus on communities that may face greater barriers to tobacco-free living, including youth, individuals with lower incomes, and those experiencing behavioral health challenges.



PREVENT

Youth & community education



EDUCATE

Tobacco & nicotine awareness



SUPPORT

Resources for tobacco-free living



Ready to quit? Free help is available.

Ready to Respond

Building Skills to Help Save Lives

SWNPHD provides Narcan education and training to schools, businesses, and community partners. Training helps participants recognize a suspected opioid overdose and know how to respond in an emergency.

Recognize ► Respond ► Save a Life

Health & Wellness Collaborative

Building Connections for Better Care

SWNPHD brings together local organizations through the Health & Wellness Collaborative to strengthen behavioral health resources across the district. Partners share information, identify community needs, and work together to improve awareness of and connections to available services.

PARTNERS • RESOURCES • CONNECTIONS

SUPPORTING CAREGIVERS

Strengthening families by making time for rest, connection and self-care.



Southwest Respite Program

Because Caregivers Need Care, Too

The Southwest Respite Program helps family caregivers take a much-needed break while knowing their loved one is safe and well cared for. Whether it is time to rest, run errands, spend time with family and friends, or simply recharge, respite gives caregivers space to care for themselves, too.

6

Families Enrolled

9

Respite Providers

3

Caregiver Events

Making Time to Recharge

Connection, creativity, and time for themselves

During FY2026, the Southwest Respite Program hosted three caregiver-focused events—a Paint Party, Craft Day, and Self-Care Evening. Each event gave caregivers an opportunity to step away from daily responsibilities, connect with others, and enjoy time doing something for themselves.



Craft Day

Time to create and recharge



Paint Party

Creativity and connection



Self-Care Evening

Making caregiver well-being a priority

REST • CONNECT • RECHARGE

Respite Across the Lifespan

Respite may support families caring for someone with a short-term disability, long-term illness, developmental disability, or other ongoing care needs.

Someone You Know. Someone You Trust.

Families can choose someone they already know and trust to provide care while the caregiver takes a break.

Family Member • Friend • Coworker

Need A Break? We're Here to Help

Southwest Respite Program

Paula Wimer
308-350-3188

FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

Using public health resources to support programs, services, and communities.

SWNPHD is committed to responsible stewardship of the resources entrusted to our department. Funding from grants, public allocations, clinical services, and other sources supports programs and services that protect and improve health across southwest Nebraska.

FY2026 Financial Overview • July 2025–June 2026 • Unaudited

\$1.62M

Total Revenue

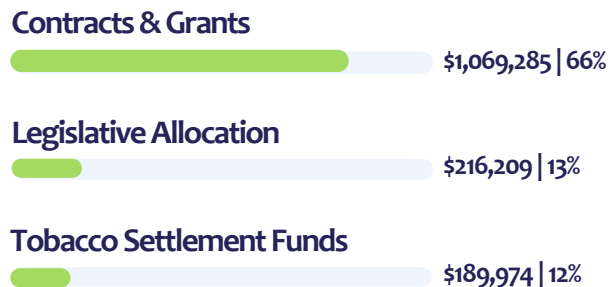
\$2.24M

Total Expenses

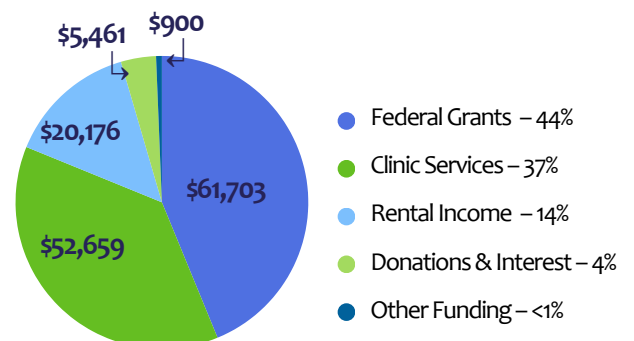
Where Our Funding Comes From

Multiple funding sources support public health across our district.

Major Revenue Sources



Additional Revenue



Investing in Our Future

In September 2025, SWNPHD purchased a building in Ogallala, establishing a permanent home for our Keith County office. The new location strengthens our presence in the community and supports public health services across southwest Nebraska.

How Resources Were Used

56%

Program Expenses

\$1,252,706

44%

Administrative Expenses

\$987,003

Responsible stewardship helps sustain the programs, services, and infrastructure our communities rely on.



Southwest Nebraska Public Health Department

PREVENT



PROMOTE



PROTECT



STAY CONNECTED

Contact Us



308-345-4223



info@swhealth.ne.gov



McCook Office

404 West 10th St
McCook, NE 69001



Ogallala Office

10 N Spruce St, Suite B
Ogallala, NE 69153

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Serving Chase, Dundy, Frontier,
Furnas, Hayes, Hitchcock, Keith,
Perkins, and Red Willow Counties