

Combating Cancer in Cattle Country

A public health story from...
Howell County Health Department



Cattle farms are a way of life in Howell County, an agrarian community of 39,000 where land is still passed from one generation to the next. This rural place, just a stone's throw from Arkansas and situated halfway between Springfield and Poplar Bluff, also has a higher rate of

breast, cervical and male lung cancer than the state rate.

"Most of our people are employed through farming or small businesses that don't offer health insurance," explains Chris Gilliam, administrator of the Howell County Health Department. "They don't have the money to pay for preventive exams like mammograms or chest X-rays. They are the working poor. They can't get on a group plan, and to buy insurance individually is way too high. It's a serious problem for us."

To combat the growing number of uninsured women in its county and their higher than average breast and uterine cancer rates, the health department secured a two-year grant from the Missouri Foundation for Health. The \$98,776 grant provides women under age 35 who have no insurance and do not qualify for Medicaid free annual Pap tests and mammograms. "Previously, the free examinations were offered through the department's Comprehensive Family Planning Services, but the program's state funding was eliminated in 2003," says Gilliam.

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The health department now provides free breast and Pap tests to 300 clients annually, including 21-year-old Rosa Ewing,* who showed up for the first time in July 2006 with no place else to go. "We were her last refuge," says Gilliam.

Rosa did not have health insurance or Medicaid, but she did have an abnormal Pap test, which checks for changes in the cells of a women's cervix. "Mild dysplasia" or "pre-cancerous condition" was the term used to describe the abnormality.

"Rosa got scared," says Carma Wheeler, director of nursing for the Howell County Health Department. "We referred her for a colposcopy, a biopsy of the cervix, which is done in a doctor's office. But she didn't have the \$600 to \$900 needed to pay for the procedure." Eventually, the health department helped secure the money for her procedure, and Rosa is still making payments on the hysterectomy she had to have in June 2007.

"Rosa probably would have died without our initial screening," says Wheeler.

**(The case described is real, but the name has been changed).*

