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Improving the health outcomes of all Georgians drives work of Georgia Southern University's Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health

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According to the United Health Foundation's 2007 survey, created in partnership with the American Public Health Association, Georgia ranks 40 out of 50 states in the health of its citizens. That ranking that has remained relatively constant for two decades.

Recognizing the need for improvement, Georgia Southern University's Jiann-Pin Hsu College of Public Health is developing a community-based plan that will improve public health in the 109 rural counties of Georgia and raise the state's national health status. That plan is being developed and implemented in Albany, Georgia, as the Southwest Georgia Community-based Health Initiative takes shape. Once the plan is in place and tested, it will be available to make a difference in all Georgia's communities.

'Helping Georgia's communities enhance their health outcomes is a process,' says Charles Hardy, dean of the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health at Georgia Southern University. 'It involves bringing constituencies together to determine ways to promote health, prevent disease, and protect individuals and families. Our faculty is doing that with the Southwest Georgia Initiative, and once established, that will provide a model for implementation in other communities where health behaviors, health policies, and access to quality health care are inadequate.'

Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital in Albany recently awarded the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health a two-year, \$500,000 grant to develop a comprehensive assessment of community needs in the hospital's Southwest Georgia service area. Using community and provider data, faculty researchers will then develop targeted programs to improve the health status of the community and remove health disparities among its residents.

'To effect better health for Georgians, we need to think beyond the medical model of disease, which treats one patient at a time,' said Hardy. 'Focusing on prevention, promotion, and protection, we can help communities improve their health outcomes. Taking that a step further, when we improve health outcomes, we will be making a significant impact on Georgia's economy.'

In developing national health rankings, the United Health Foundation considers a variety of determinants: personal behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, obesity, and high school graduation rates; community environment factors such as violent crime, occupational fatalities, infectious

disease, and children in poverty; public and health policies, such as lack of health insurance, per capita public health spending, and immunization coverage; and clinical care factors, such as adequacy of prenatal care, number of primary care physicians, and preventable hospitalizations.

In addition to health determinants, the rankings consider health outcomes: poor mental health days, poor physical health days, infant mortality, cardiovascular deaths, cancer deaths, and premature deaths.

“As we target lifestyle and community-based factors that determine health, we expect to see improved health outcomes,” said Hardy. “When we see a reduction in infant mortality, in heart-related and cancer-related deaths, when we see fewer sick days and fewer health disparities among Georgians, we will see a significant impact on Georgia’s health economy.”

The mission of the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health focuses on Georgia’s rural counties (35,000 or fewer residents), where the rate of death from all causes, especially cancer and heart disease, is significantly greater than urban counties. In rural counties, the infant mortality rate is higher than in urban areas, as is the number of pregnancies with little or no prenatal care and with low birth weight. Compared with their urban counterparts, rural counties have a higher percentage of residents living below poverty level and a higher percentage of residents over 65 years of age.