

WVU Country Roads Tour Visits County

By Cathy Patton

WELCH - WVU Extension Agent Donald Reed, Jr. facilitated a healthcare panel discussion at the Welch Library Thursday morning in which local officials spent nearly two hours describing local healthcare concerns to new faculty members at West Virginia University.

Staged as a part of WVU's "Country Roads Tour", the discussion centered on the top health problems in McDowell County, local healthcare barriers and the causes and effects of the barriers and ideas for how to make improvements.

Local panelists included Robin Pruitt, Welch Community Hospital; Kathie Whitt, FACES; Cathy Wright, retired RN; Shelia Muncy, Circle of Hope; Erin Bailey, Alternative Sentencing; Todd Burnette, Southern Highlands Community Health; Nathan Acosta, McDowell Choices and Dana Lester, WVU Extension.

Though most panelists listed substance abuse as the number one health issue, FACES Director Kathie Whitt listed depression and anxiety, adding that depression and anxiety feed into the substance abuse problem.

Cathy Wright, RN, opined that Hepatitis C and B and HIV are also a local problem. "A lot of people are ill and don't even know it," she said, stressing that early treatments and diagnoses are necessary if the problems are ever to be properly addressed.

Shelia Muncy, Circle of Hope, related that it has been her experience that broken homes contribute to the drug abuse epidemic. "Forty six percent of local children live in a home without a biological parent present," she said.

Translated into a number, Whitt said that 46 percent means that 2,213 kids are being raised by someone other than their mothers or fathers.

Todd Burnette, Southern Highlands added that substance abuse has increased 200 percent since 2001.

Speaking of families with problems, Alternative Sentencing Director Erin Bailey said that she has seen multi-generations of the same family be placed in the alternative sentencing program because of drug abuse.

In touching on Wright's assertion that more doctors with a broader-based knowledge of medicines and diseases are needed, Robin Pruitt, Welch Community Hospital, said that McDowell is at the top of many negative lists and at the bottom of many goods one. The county, she said, leads the state in such

limit access to health care," she said. "We have a lot of work to do and welcome any help we can get."

Whitt pointed out that a lack of insurance for those in the 18 - 25 age bracket "bars many from receiving adequate medical care."

"We need to be preventative instead of reactive," she said.

In closing, Reed reminded the WVU faculty members, "McDowell County has been studied to death by people who want to come here and write grants and save us, without asking for input for the people they are trying to help."



PANEL DISCUSSION - Those pictured here participated in a panel discussion on the state of public health in McDowell County. WVU Extension Agent Donald Reed formed the panel as a part of the WVU Country Roads Tour to acquaint new WVU professors with the beauty of West Virginia and its people.

Shown (l-r) are Todd Burnette, Southern Highlands; Erin Bailey, Alternative Sentencing Program; Nathan Acosta, McDowell CHOICES; Shelia Muncy, Circle of Hope; Cathy Wright, retired RN; Robin Pruitt, Welch Community Hospital; Kathie Whitt, FACES Director and Dana Lester, WVU Extension Agent. (Photo by Cathy Patton)

conditions as heart disease, diabetes and childhood obesity.

Nathan Acosta, McDowell CHOICES, noted that 56 percent of fifth graders in the county are obese.

On another note, Pruitt said that one in every three babies born at Welch Community do not go home with their mothers due to substance abuse.

"The culture, transportation issues and the lack of primary care providers

"Before you do anything, I'm asking you to please reach out to the people on this panel and talk to them first."

Following the panel discussion at the library, the faculty members enjoyed lunch at the Sterling Drive In, where they heard presentations by EDA Director Penn Adams and Superintendent of Schools Nelson Spencer.