A passion for public health

Barbara Kovacs, director of the York City Bureau of Health, works out at Gold’s Gym in York Township. Kovacs has been in the role for the last five years and with the department for about 20.

By LEIGH ZALESKI for Smart

In the 1990s, after Barbara Kovacs attended a public health conference in Tucson, Ariz., she knew she one day wanted to direct the York City Bureau of Health.

She had been working for the department as a planner for a couple of years. She said the energy and passion she felt from others at the conference inspired her to dive more deeply into the field.

When she returned to York, she told then Director Dr. David L. Hawk — now medical director — that she aspired to run his department.

Soon after, Hawk created an assistant director position that Kovacs filled until she was promoted to director in 2009.

“It’s a discipline,” Kovacs said of public health. “It’s a profession, and it entails so many parts of life.”

Within months of transitioning into the position, she faced a major health issue: swine flu, or the H1N1 virus. During the global pandemic, she spent her days coordinating with the Pennsylvania Department of Health and the School District of the City of York to determine how the virus was affecting York.

“It was exhilarating and scary,” she said of assuming a leadership role during the outbreak.

Many services

The city’s health bureau provides services ranging from immunizations to maternal and child health programs to sexually transmitted disease treatments.

Kovacs said part of her job entails securing funding and juggling finances with the community’s needs.

Among her accomplishments, she recently worked to create a strategic plan for the department. The plan, which was adopted in June 2013, focuses on relationships with stakeholders, upstream issues, quality improvement training and organizational development.

Upstream issues consist of targeting health concerns at the root cause to enforce prevention, rather than only treating the problem. For example, Kovacs said, instead of just treating children for lead poisoning, the city could pass an ordinance that would require all rental units to be lead free.

To improve quality, she said, the bureau recently explored how long it takes to process someone for an immunization and learned that wait times could be shortened if employees called patients and recorded their information before their visits.

Making a plan

Kovacs said a strategic plan is necessary for a health department to become accredited — one of her goals. She said accreditation sets apart health departments.

Under her five-year tenure, the department also has made strides in combating obesity.

In June 2013, the Healthy Communities Grant Program awarded York — along with Racine, Wis., and Baltimore — a grant to offer partially subsidized Weight Watchers memberships to low-income residents. In January, the city received a $100,000 grant to address childhood obesity. She said part of that grant will provide chillers in schools so kids have better access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Kovacs said she has learned that leadership isn’t easy and that she’s working to improve those skills. She’s learned that people don’t need to like her or the decisions she makes, but she needs their respect.

“I can’t please everybody,” she said.

“‘That part hurts,’” Kovacs said she enjoys making a difference in people’s lives.

“There’s such a variety of things going on in public health,” she said. “People don’t do it for the money — it’s more of a passion.”