



County tops in state on new U.S. News & World Report health rating

By Stuart Korfhage
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St. Johns County has been selected as the state's healthiest county by the second research panel this year.

Earlier this month, the county was ranked No. 1 in Florida for the seventh straight year by County Health Rankings. The newest honor comes from U.S. News & World Report in collaboration with the Aetna Foundation.

In the U.S. News ranking, St. Johns County is rated No. 162. Only the top 500 counties in the nation are ranked, and the only other Florida counties on the list are Clay (No. 482) and Seminole (No. 423).

According to a news release announcing the results, the purpose of the rankings was to evaluate "which communities offer their citizens the greatest opportunity to live a productive, healthy life, the rankings offer insight into the best approaches for improving public health that can be shared and implemented across the country."

According to the release, the information gained in the study shows where a person lives can be a great indicator of one's overall health.

"Research has shown that in the United States, your ZIP code is a greater predictor of your life expectancy than your genetic code," said Mark T. Bertolini, chairman of the Aetna Foundation and chairman and CEO of Aetna, in the release. "In other words, where you live has a significant impact on your overall health."

Much like the County Health Rankings, the U.S. News study focused on a variety of measures that go well beyond standard health care. The categories used for rankings included: population health, equity, education, economy, housing, food and nutrition, environment, public safety, community vitality, and infrastructure.

St. Johns County fared well in most aspects of the ratings, but it performed best in the category of community vitality. That category focused on “the stability and social cohesion of a community through measures of population growth, voter participation and more.”

It’s no secret the population here is growing rapidly. And civic engagement is very high. The county’s voter participation rate was particularly high at more than 85 percent, based on the total number of votes cast in the 2016 presidential election as a percentage of total voting-age citizens in 2016.

The county also has a high rate of home ownership at more than 75 percent.

Helping to propel the county to a solid ranking were its scores in the categories of economy and infrastructure. St. Johns County has a low rate of poverty and a high level of median household income (\$66,194) that was \$20,000 more than the national average — based on the 2015 five-year average.

The infrastructure rating was boosted by the fact the 100 percent of the population has access to the internet and that a small percentage of the population (4.9 percent) commutes 60 minutes or more to work.

Where the county was found somewhat deficient was in the category of housing. There are no major issues with quality, but the problem here is affordability.

The U.S. News rating found that county residents need to work 52.8 hours to pay for affordable housing. That number reflects the hours a worker earning the average wage would need to work to afford a one-bedroom rental unit at HUD-estimated Fair Market Rent rates while spending no more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs (based on 2016 statistics).