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State to set goals for immunization
BY KASHA STOLL

Kansas ranks 43rd in the nation for childhood immunization, and state health officials are determined to find out why.

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment and the Kansas Health Institute announced Monday the launch of "Immunize Kansas Kids," a multiyear project designed to understand why the state's health system is failing to achieve higher immunization rates and how the problem can be solved.

The project is being funded by the Kansas Health Foundation.

According to the National Immunization Survey, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 77.5 percent of Kansas children between the ages of 19 and 35 months receive the minimum complement of vaccinations. That number is well short of the national goal of 90 percent.

"Surveys give us numbers, but they don't give us whys," said Gianfranco Pezzino, KHI director of public health studies.

Pezzino said state health officials hope to learn through the new project why the state is lagging behind in childhood immunizations, why many kids receive their final vaccinations later than scheduled and how immunizations are financed in Kansas.

Those answers will be found by talking with policymakers, health care providers and parents, Pezzino said. Once the underlying problems are understood, a plan for addressing those concerns will be formed.

"We don't want to fix one little problem at a time," Pezzino said. "We want to fix the system."

He said the agencies hope to identify the problems by September or October and have a plan of action outlined by the end of the year.

Officials said the project is ambitious.

Howard Rodenberg, KDHE director of the division of health, said there are many variables and each must be addressed. He mentioned differing socio-economic levels, problems with insurance and the geographical density of providers.

The standard vaccination series includes shots to protect children against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, polio, measles, mumps, rubella, hepatitis B and some types of meningitis.

Although most kids are immunized in time for kindergarten, Rodenberg said it is important for children to receive their vaccinations by age 2.

That need was highlighted last summer when a 2-month-old child from south-central Kansas died of pertussis, or whooping cough.

Reports of pertussis statewide increased tenfold between 2003 and 2005. Last year, the state

recorded 535 cases of pertussis by Dec. 19, up from 251 in 2004.

The retrospective school survey produced by KDHE shows that 35 rural counties in Kansas are achieving 80 percent vaccination for children younger than 2. None of the five urban counties - Douglas, Johnson, Sedgwick, Shawnee or Wyandotte - has managed that level.