



8 pages

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EVAN BARNUM/Colby Free Press

Visitors from Smart Start and Kids Port Group Child Care presented the 2011 Kids Count report for Thomas County to *Colby Free Press* Publisher Sharon Friedlander.

## One in ten children live in poverty here

By Kevin Bottrell

Colby Free Press  
kbottrell@nwkansanews.com

Nearly 13 percent of children under 18 in Thomas County live below the 100 percent poverty line, according to new statistics from Kids Count.

Kids Count, a joint effort between the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Kansas Action for Children, releases new figures each year on subjects like immunizations, alcohol and tobacco use and child poverty.

The number of Thomas County children below the poverty line has been decreasing slightly, while the state average – 17 percent – has been increasing. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services puts the poverty line at \$22,350 for a family of four; \$3,820 more for each additional person.

Forty-six percent of Thomas County Students are on Free or Reduced Lunch, 1 percent below the state average.

Eighty-six percent of kindergartners are fully immunized, 16 percent higher than the state average.

About 6.5 percent of babies are born weighing less than 5.5 pounds. The number of infant deaths per 1,000 live births is 27.78, while the state average is 7.01.

Using a survey from this year, the report said the number of sixth, eighth, 10th and 12th graders who reported using cigarettes or smokeless tobacco in the last 30 days was 12.73 percent. On the survey, three in 10 of those students said they had consumed five or more consecutive drinks on at least one occasion in the past two weeks. Both of these numbers are higher than the state averages.

An average of 411 children are enrolled in Medicaid each month in Thomas County and 114 are in the Children's Health Insurance Program, which extends coverage to children in families not eligible for Medicaid. Statewide, more than 190,000 are on Medicaid and more than 40,000 are in the insurance program.

Thomas County is defined as a rural county because it has between 6 and 19.9 residents per square mile. This puts it in the same category as Norton, Phillips and Scott counties. Most of the other counties in northwest Kansas are designated as frontier, because they have fewer than 6 residents per square mile.

Median household income is \$44,836, about 3,000 below the state average. The county is 89.36 percent white, 7.86 percent Hispanic, .44 percent African-American, .44 percent Asian or Hawaiian and .16 percent Native American.

## First influenza cases seen; vaccines available locally

State officials are saying they have documented the first influenza cases of the 2011-2012 flu season.

On Dec. 21, the Kansas Health and Environmental Laboratories confirmed influenza in specimens from two adults from the same workplace in northwest Kansas. Neither patient had reported receiving a flu vaccination. Five coworkers were also ill with flu symptoms.

In Colby, flu vaccinations can be obtained at a number of places. The Thomas County Health Department held mass flu clinics in the fall, giving out 425 vaccinations. Administrator Kasiah Rothchild said no more clinics are planned, but the department has the flu vaccine on hand. Walk-ins are welcome or you can call 460-4596 for an appointment.

Colby Medical and Surgical Center has a trained provider for the vaccine who is there from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Family Center for Health Care also provides vaccinations. Walk-ins are welcome at both facilities.



KEVIN BOTTRELL/Colby Free Press

Colby Police Chief Randy Jones prepared to get a flu shot in October. The county health department gave out 425 vaccinations this year.

See "VACCINES," Page 2

## Some school districts worried about repair, building money

By John Hanna

The Associated Press

TOPEKA – Gov. Sam Brownback's plan to overhaul how Kansas finances its public schools has left educators and state legislators wondering whether some school districts will be able to pay for new equipment, keep up with repairs or put up new buildings.

They're concerned that the plan doesn't earmark state funds to supplement the local property taxes revenues districts raise to finance equipment and repairs. They're also nervous about statements from the administration that it wants to stop having the state contribute to the annual payments

when some districts issue bonds to finance repair or construction projects.

Brownback and his top aides have said the plan will simplify the state's school funding formula, distribute dollars more fairly and prevent future lawsuits after the changes take effect with the 2013-14 school year. His policy director, Landon Fulmer, also has said the governor remains flexible in resolving some issues, including how much the state will help pay for equipment, repairs and new construction.

Some officials, like Iola school Superintendent Brian Pekarek, say there's too much uncertainty as they examine Brownback's

proposals. The Iola district, with about 1,300 students about 100 miles southwest of the Kansas City area, has the state's oldest high school and faces questions about renovating or replacing the 98-year-old building, as well as four other aging schools.

"I don't know what this means," Pekarek said of Brownback's plan. "We're not on that solid, rock foundation that we had."

Brownback's plan would scrap a two-decade-old practice of linking some of districts' spending authority specifically to the number of students at risk of failing or the number who don't speak English

See "MONEY," Page 2

## Prizes for buckling up



KEVIN BOTTRELL/Colby Free Press

Colby High School held a drawing for eight Visa gift cards last week as part of the Seatbelts Are For Everyone program. The Kansas Highway Patrol will give out prizes each month until the end of the school year for students who have a perfect record of wearing their seatbelts.

## Patrol says holiday driving was safer

TOPEKA (AP) – The Kansas Highway Patrol says the Christmas holiday appeared to be safer on the state's highways this year than it was last year.

The patrol says it had no fatal crashes to handle from 6 p.m. Friday to 11:59 p.m. Monday. During the same 78-hour Christmas travel period in 2010, the patrol handled two fatal crashes, one of which involved driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

However, the patrol says it worked three DUI-related crashes this year – the same total as in 2010 – and made 22 DUI arrests, up from 13 last year.

Still, the patrol says the number of speeding citations it issued dropped by 12 percent, to 670 in 2011 from 759 in 2010.

## Cimarron municipal election will be test case for voter identification law

By John Hanna

The Associated Press

TOPEKA – A southwestern Kansas town's election next month on the financing of a new municipal swimming pool will be the first test of a much-debated state law that requires voters to show photo identification at the polls.

The law takes effect Sunday. On Jan. 10, The 2,200 residents of Cimarron, about 175 miles west of Wichita, will decide whether to impose a 1.25 percent

sales tax to help finance the new pool and cover its operating costs.

Gray County Clerk Bonnie Swartz said Tuesday that she's not anticipating significant problems, though she expects some voters will be frustrated if they forget to bring ID. She said if turnout is strong, 40 percent of registered voters, or about 480 people, may cast ballots.

"There are going to be some who say, 'You know who I am,'" she said. "It's harder to enforce this type of a law in a small community because everybody knows everybody."

Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, a Republican who pushed legislators earlier this year to enact the photo ID requirement as an anti-fraud measure,

said he plans to travel to Gray County to observe the voting. He said his office is planning an education campaign ahead of the poll.

"It will give us some indicators of how the voters will respond to the new requirement," Kobach said. "We'll be collecting data on what percentage of people forget their IDs."

In pushing for the law, Kobach released a report showing that the secretary of state's office had received about six dozen reports of election irregularities involving more than 200 ballots from 1997 through 2010. He took the reports as a sign of a bigger problem, but skeptics said the scanty count of complaints didn't justify a voter ID law that could suppress

turnout among poor, minority and elderly voters.

Kansas House Minority Leader Paul Davis, a Lawrence Democrat, said he doubts an election on a local ballot question in a small town is a good test of how the law will work in the presidential election.

"I think we just have to do our best to get the word out to people and make sure that it is a forgiving process for those who are trying to comply with the law and simply forget their IDs," he said.

The U.S. Justice Department is reviewing a photo ID law in Texas and last week blocked South Carolina from implementing its new statute requiring voters to show photo identification at the polls.

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, during a speech in Texas earlier this month, called on political parties to "resist the temptation to suppress certain votes in the hope of attaining electoral success."

Kansas legislators also approved a Kobach proposal this year to require people registering to vote for the first time in Kansas to produce proof that they're citizens, but that requirement doesn't take effect until January 2013.

Kobach, who served in the Justice Department under former Republican President George W. Bush, has criticized the Holder-led Justice Department for being overly political and has expressed con-

See "ELECTION," Page 2



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