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MAC CONFERENCE 2024: Brain health, election integrity, county parks top agenda

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Ottawa County Sheriff Steve Kempker talks about the benefits of a brain health-based wellness program at the opening plenary session of the 2024 MAC conference in Acme. Others on the panel included, from left: Allegan County Commissioner Jim Storey, Wayne County Commissioner Melissa Daub, Dr. Joel Robertson and Kent County Administrator Al Vanderberg.

Special to the Record-Eagle/Rodney Sanford for MAC

TRAVERSE CITY — County officials from throughout Michigan gathered at the Grand Traverse Resort in Acme this week to share insights, discuss challenges and learn about innovative new solutions to common problems.

The event, which drew about 300 people, was hosted by the Michigan Association of Counties. Grand Traverse County was the hospitality host. The last time MAC held its annual conference in Acme was 2019.

A total of 14 workshops and presentations were on the agenda, covering many topics of common concern, including:

- Harnessing brain research data to improve health and reduce health insurance costs
- Detecting and preventing election-related crimes
- Increasing the value of public parks through better civic engagement (presented by John Chase of Grand Traverse County)
- How to help young people develop leadership skills and contribute to local communities
- Understanding the current “threat environment” for elected officials
- Changes in tax foreclosure litigation
- Cyber threat protection and response strategies
- Investing opioid settlement funds at the local level
- Emergency management preparation

MAC organizers also conducted six regional caucuses and elected its new leadership team at the conference.

Founded in 1898, the Lansing-based organization recently celebrated 125 years of service and is the oldest group representing local governments in Michigan.

Approximately one in every four bills introduced in the state Legislature affects county government, according to the MAC website. Each year, the group’s six standing policy committees draft legislative platforms to advocate for the needs of Michigan’s 83 counties.

HARNESSING BRAIN RESEARCH

The first plenary session at the conference featured a panel discussion of new ways to reduce stress, anxiety and depression among county employees by leveraging recent research into brain chemistry.

Dr. Joel Robertson, founder and CEO of Robertson Brain Health, explained how his AI-driven approach to brain health has helped two Michigan counties save up to \$20 million in health care costs by employing a data-driven wellness program for public employees.

The voluntary program includes specific, personalized recommendations for diet, exercise, music, work scheduling and relationships.

Law enforcement officers in particular are subject to large amounts of job-related stress that can lead to substance abuse, anxiety and family problems, Robertson said.

Panel member Steve Kempker, Ottawa County sheriff, said he was deeply skeptical about the proposed program at first but changed his mind when he saw the benefits to his staff.

“As cops we’re always skeptical about everything,” he said. “When I first learned about this program, I thought: ‘What kind of voodoo science is this?’

“Then I talked to some folks in Kent County who had good things to say about it. They saw, real, measurable benefits over several years.”

Since then, Kempker said he’s seen many positive benefits in the sheriff’s office staff, including lower blood pressure, healthy weight loss, better eating habits, improved relationships on the job and at home, and lower stress levels.

Kent County Administrator Al Vanderberg, formerly of Ottawa County, told a similar story about the brain-health based wellness program.

“It started during the Great Recession,” he explained. “We had to cut about \$19 million from our budget for health care. I proposed a high-deductible health insurance plan with a companion health management plan.

“I discovered that the wrong approach was to raise prices (for county employees) and reduce benefits. The right approach was to save money by reducing claims.”

Robertson said that a one-size-fits-all approach to employee wellness almost never works, and that the participation rate in such generic methods is often 11 percent or lower.

In contrast, the Robertson Health program accounts for individual differences and variations in each department of an organization.

Each participant is given an assessment form to fill out, which is then analyzed through a specialized AI-based software program and compared to data from 17,000 other employees using a set of 287,000 possible variables – a process called “predictive analysis.” (The data is aggregated and anonymous to protect privacy.)

The software program then generates confidential report that measures the level of five key brain chemicals, such as dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, acetylcholine and endorphins. Using those scientific results, the program recommends specific dietary and lifestyle changes for each individual.

For example, some people might benefit most from more frequent exercise, while others could benefit more from a combination of dietary changes and music-based relaxation techniques.

“We’ve learned that there are two overriding questions when it comes to wellness programs,” Robertson said. “First, will people actually participate? And, second, is the program effective?”

“Educating people about a disease, such as diabetes, does not change the behavior in most cases,” he added. “People need to know what a program will do for us, not what it should do.”


More Information

To learn more about Robertson Brain Health and its data-driven wellness programs, visit: <https://robertsonbrainhealth.com/>.

To learn more about the Michigan Association of Counties, visit: <https://micounties.org/>.

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