



"Girl" on Central Park Sculpture Trail, Birštonas, Kaunas Region (by Sculptor Romas Kvintas)



Kaunas Region, Lithuania

General overview

The Kaunas Region, which lies in central Lithuania, covers an area of 8089 km² with a population of 569 571. The region is divided into eight municipalities (the Kaunas, Kėdainiai, Kaišiadorys, Jonava, Prienai and Raseiniai districts, Kaunas city and Birštonas town (1)). Six public health offices (visuomenės sveikatos biurai) in Kaunas city and the Kaunas district implement prevention and promotion programmes related to the mental and physical health of those living in the regions.

Through its participation in the WHO Regions for Health Network (RHN), the Kaunas Region aims to improve the mental and physical health of each and every one of its citizens by, among others, improving access to health care, building a better infrastructure towards healthier lifestyles, and reducing health-risk factors.

In 2020, the average life expectancy in the region was 75.53 years (70.67 years for men and 80.23 years for women). The main causes of death were cardiovascular diseases (circulatory diseases (817.6/100 000), ischemic heart disease (568.0/100 000)) and malignant tumours (294.9/100 000). The COVID-19 death rates were 98.7/100 000. Due to pandemic-related quarantine and hygiene requirements the same year, there was a 2.6-fold decrease in the number of communicable diseases across the country (2).

In the public sector, the main source of health-care financing is the Compulsory Health Insurance Fund (CHIF). Compared with 2019, CHIF expenditure in 2020 increased by 12.5%, amounting to €2.3 billion. The largest proportion of this expenditure on personal health care went to hospital care

services (42.8%); specialized outpatient-care services and primary-health-care (PHC) services accounted for 22.4% and 19.4%, respectively (3).

In 2020, the gross domestic product per capita was 16.7.

Regional activities linked to the WHO European Programme of Work

The following activities are linked to the three core priorities of the European Programme of Work (EPW): ((i) moving towards Universal

Health Coverage (UHC); (ii) promoting health and well-being; and (iii) protecting against health emergencies.



Moving towards UHC

In Lithuania, the National Public Health Center under the Ministry of Health is responsible for various promotional activities and preventive programmes aimed at improving people's health. All PHC services provided by public institutions are free of charge to patients in need, thanks to the compulsory National Health Insurance Fund, which is based on employer payments and state-budget funds. In the Kaunas Region, PHC centres (policlinics, dispensaries and family-doctors' offices) are located within easy access of residents living in more remote areas. In addition, each municipality has ambulance stations, mental-health centres, and nursing hospitals.

The six public health offices in Kaunas city and the Kaunas district receive funding from the Lithuanian Government and provide health-promotion services free of charge. Activities are planned in compliance with the demands of the Minister of Health. Currently, the main requirement is that all regions work on strengthening health post COVID-19.



Promoting health and well-being

As already mentioned, primary health care is available free of charge to all citizens in Lithuania who pay for national health insurance, or for whom employers or the Employment Service cover it. Flaws in Lithuania's health system in the post-soviet era are being addressed. For example, the long waiting times for doctors' appointments have become shorter and the use of remote consultations has started. The introduction of computers and digital systems has improved patient visits and shortened the time spent in doctors' offices.

In both Kaunas city and the Kaunas district, there are 40 personal health-care institutions with active licences, which provide training in medical care, first aid and hygiene, as well as other health services. Each year, the number of medical students graduating from university programmes increases. Many proceed to open private centres or seek work in public institutions where they try to apply their knowledge for the better.



Protecting against health emergencies

An arrangement has been made with the national Center for Health Education and Diseases Prevention whereby training in cardiopulmonary resuscitation and first aid is offered across communities, and volunteers are taught how to use defibrillators in emergency situations. A “defibrillator map” is on the agenda, which involves expanding the availability of these devices in larger buildings and offices across the Kaunas Region.

Public health offices across the municipalities organize and provide training in first aid free of charge to members of the community to enable them to act in health emergencies. Volunteers are invited to learn about first aid and encouraged to teach others. The public health offices also cooperate with personal health-care institutions, the social sector, and influencers on promoting effective first aid and teaching the correct action to take in emergencies. The social and health-care sectors are responsible for improving access to their services and providing essential help and practice to the citizens of the region free of charge.

Actions linked to the EPW flagship initiatives

(The Mental Health Coalition; Empowerment through digital health; The European Immunization Agenda 2030; Healthy behaviours: incorporating behavioural and cultural insights.)

Initiatives relative to the Mental Health Coalition

Priorities related to mental health include the reduction of negative, long-term consequences of COVID-19 by improving psychological resilience, teaching coping mechanisms for stress, and improving mental well-being. This is done by providing free individual psychologist consultations

and conducting various group activities organized by public health offices across the municipalities. Consultations and teaching programmes are also organized to reduce the suicide rates in the region and help people with alcohol-dependency problems.

Initiatives relative to empowerment through digital health

Empowerment through digital health started during the pandemic in 2020 when most activities moved to the internet, and lectures, consultations and lessons began to be conducted remotely. Although this brought some challenges to student

motivation, it proved to be a more convenient way to reach and widen the audience for health-promotion activities through, for example, seminars for stress-management groups, or online physical workouts.

Initiatives relative to the European Immunization Agenda

In accordance with the European Immunization Agenda, vaccination against the coronavirus is organized to reduce mortality from the virus. The municipalities collaborate on providing

transportation services to health-care institutions for preventive testing (for example, prostate or breast examinations, cervical screenings). These transportation services are funded by the Patient

Fund (Ligonių kasos). During the spring and summer seasons, vaccination against tick-borne

encephalitis is also promoted and encouraged.

Initiatives relative to healthy behaviours: incorporating behavioural and cultural insight

Since most deaths in the region are the result of cardiovascular diseases, much attention is paid to increasing people's physical activity levels and improving their nutrition. In this connection, the municipalities have agreed to augment the numbers of education and health-promotion specialists in schools, build and increase access

to sports and leisure infrastructures. There is a focus on educational institutions planning the development of methodological tools for healthy nutrition, diet plans, and plans to include local-farm produce in the dietary plans of schools and kindergartens.

The three most important topics for collaboration within the Regions for Health Network

These are:

1. physical activity and education
2. emergency prevention and defibrillator maps
3. improved nutrition in education institutions.

Main partners and collaborators

These are:

- the eight municipalities and their governing mayors;
- the Lithuanian Sports University;
- the Vytautas Magnus University;
- the Lithuanian University of Health Sciences.

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1 All URLs accessed 29 May 2022.