

Mayor Mobilizes Community Change

As mayor of Turianske Teplice, Alena Chlapkov, MD, draws on her medical background to improve the health of her community. Chlapkov, 53, is in the middle of her second four-year term as mayor of the rural town of 7,000 residents. A gynecologist and pediatrician for 30 years, Chlapkov has continued to practice medicine one day a week while in office. Chlapkov is also a member of the Slovak Parliament. She talked with *CommonHealth* Editor Barbara Ruben while in Cleveland, Ohio, in January.

***CommonHealth:* As a doctor, what do you bring to community leadership that other mayors in Slovakia may not?**

Chlapkov: Taking care of the health of the people is my first priority. Other mayors might invest in roads or buildings, but my priority is having a healthy community. This is not only important today, but for the health of our children and grandchildren.

As a doctor, my concern for the social welfare of the residents is very strong. It is important that we're always here if someone needs help. We have programs for the disabled, the elderly and families with small children. We have a program similar to your Meals on Wheels to provide meals to those who are too old or ill to prepare them themselves.

***CommonHealth:* What led you to become involved in the healthy communities project?**

Chlapkov: The spas of Turianske Teplice have been used for 700 years. Their mineral waters are good for orthopedic, rheumatoid and urological problems. The environment of our city is very healthy. It is one of the few cities in Slovakia that has really fresh air. The first phase of our project is to maintain and improve the quality of our environment. We want to develop as a spa city. That will not only promote our economy, but will serve as an incentive to make sure the environment is clean. We have both national and city statutes to prevent heavy industry that could damage the environment.

It is important to realize that the number of children developing upper respiratory tract diseases and allergies has been growing. It has been proven that urbanization brings an increased load upon their nervous systems and a worse quality of the environment, including air, water and noise pollution. We want to make sure we avoid this in our region.

Also, residents have not been taking responsibility for their own health. We want to institute more preventive medicine and education.

***CommonHealth:* What are the biggest challenges facing Turianske Teplice?**

Chlapkov: The first problem we have to confront is food. We need to make sure we have a variety of healthy foods available to our residents. People are buying meat with a lot of fat just because the price is lower. This isn't a problem we can solve locally, but need to seek change at a national level. I am a founding member of the national Organization of Health Protection, which includes members of the Slovak Departments of Agriculture, Health and the Environment. At this level, we can try to effect change in both the economy and health.

Before we had a state system of medicine, and today we are trying to implement a private system. We were unable to get the money for new technology, and the flow of information about the medical world stopped. Through the partnership, I hope we will learn more about modernizing and privatizing our medical system

We also need to make further lifestyle changes. We want to popularize exercise, such as sports and hiking. We are encouraging residents to cut down on smoking and alcohol consumption.

CommonHealth: What have you already accomplished?

Chlapkov:We promote healthy lifestyles through schools, medical organizations, clubs for retired people and other community groups. We invite experts to give lectures to all these groups on how to take care of themselves. In school, we not only have programs to prevent drug abuse, but ones that show how to take care of the environment and eat healthy foods.

We instituted a city-wide recycling program two years ago. A weekly newspaper is distributed throughout the region to promote lifestyle changes. We participate in Earth Day, Healthy Cities Day and Clean up the World Day.

CommonHealth: From your visit to Cleveland, what are the most important ideas you hope to implement in Turianske Teplice?

Chlapkov:We will be using the MetroHealth System as a model for preventive medicine back home. We know that the problems that the United States faces as a democracy we'll also be facing in the future: drugs, homelessness and teen pregnancy. We want to learn how to prevent these problems as much as possible before they start. In Turianske Teplice, for example, we only have about 20 homeless people. But as housing becomes privatized, some people aren't going to have the money for the increased rent, and the homeless problem is likely to increase.