

1911-2011-Vital Statistics Historical Summary

One hundred years ago in 1911, legislation was passed to establish the Division of Vital Statistics to provide for the registration, compilation and preservation of birth, death and stillbirth records for the State of Kansas. Marriage records were added in 1913 and divorces in 1951. Vital records are the foundation for public health statistics today, as they were a century ago. The data from these records is crucial for identifying, assessing and improving the health of Kansans and certified copies of these records are necessary for proof of age and citizenship and receipt of benefits.

An article written in 1911 by the first Kansas State Registrar, W. J. V. Deacon, explains the need for registering births and deaths. It states deaths should be recorded to keep track of the movement of the population, to obtain information on "where the plague spots are" in order to implement preventative measures, and for the legal value attached to the record in cases of inheritance, insurance and the detection of criminal practice. The recording of births, according to the article, was needed for tracking the movement of the population and provision of documentary evidence of a person's age and place of birth. These needs are still relevant in 2011.

So, what has changed in 100 years of tracking vital records? In 1911, the three leading causes of death were heart disease, tuberculosis and kidney disease. One hundred years later, the three leading causes are chronic diseases -- cancer, heart disease and chronic respiratory diseases. Communicable diseases do continue to be a concern for public health.

Infant deaths have greatly diminished. One hundred years ago, there were around 3,000 infant deaths annually in Kansas. Today, there are around 250 a year. Kansans are also living longer. One hundred years ago, the average age of death was 47 years compared to 74.1 today.

Collection of vital record information and issuance of certified copies has changed from a totally manual process to the availability of a completely electronic one, using a web-based system for faster, more efficient and accurate electronic filing and issuance of vital records. Rapid reporting greatly enhances the ability to identify public health areas of concern and implement preventative measures.

In the next hundred years, improvements will continue to be made in the way vital records are registered and issued and in the collection, analysis and reporting of health statistics to enhance and strengthen the foundation of measuring and improving the health of Kansans.

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