

The Critical Role for County* Public Health in the Era of Health Care Reform

What County* Public Health Departments do for You!

Prevent Epidemics and the Spread of Disease

A core function of county public health departments is to quickly identify and prevent the spread of communicable and food-borne illnesses. Local health department strategies to prevent and control diseases include the provision of clinical services, health promotion and education, and surveillance and containment.

- Epidemiologists identify and investigate outbreaks of communicable disease in their communities, including influenza, tuberculosis (TB), meningitis and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and food-borne illnesses to contain the spread of disease. Public health officers receive and evaluate reports from health providers and laboratories on more than 80 statutorily reportable diseases, and report the information to the California Department of Public Health (CDPH).
- County public health laboratories perform diagnostic testing to aid in communicable disease surveillance and control efforts. In addition, public health labs provide environmental testing services, such as identification of food borne illnesses and water quality to support county health department response to E. coli or salmonella outbreaks in restaurants and keep drinking and beach water safe. These essential lab services are not provided by private clinical labs.
- Public health nurses and immunization staff work closely with schools to ensure that children have the necessary immunizations to prevent illness – the recent pertussis (whooping cough) outbreak demonstrated the continued need for vigilance to improve immunization rates.
- County public health department staff take other measures as necessary to stop the spread of communicable diseases. This may involve partner tracking and education for STDs and public health nurse visits to TB patients to ensure they are taking their medications.

Plan for and Respond to Public Health Emergencies

When a disaster, disease, outbreak or other health emergency strikes, the county public health department plays a lead role in protecting the health of the community.

- California's county public health departments plan and train on a regular basis in order to be prepared to respond to all types of health emergencies, including pandemic influenza or bioterrorist attack, community outbreaks of meningitis or pertussis and natural disasters such as wildfires, earthquakes or floods.
- During threats of pandemics, such as the recent H1N1 influenza outbreak, local health departments lead crucial public information/education campaigns in their communities, increase lab capacity to test a large influx of specimens submitted by community hospitals and providers, and stage large scale vaccination clinics with a focus on the most vulnerable populations in their communities.
- During natural disasters such as wildfires, public health staff perform essential functions in both response and recovery phases including educating the public about how to protect themselves, planning safe evacuations, operating shelter facilities and ensuring vital medical care for displaced medically fragile residents.

Promote and Encourage Healthy Behaviors

Public health sounded the alarm on the obesity epidemic ten years ago. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that on average there is \$1,429 in avoidable healthcare expenses per year associated with obesity. Today three behaviors (poor nutrition, lack of physical activity and tobacco use) contribute to four diseases (heart disease/stroke, cancer, diabetes and respiratory disease) which result in more than 50% of deaths.

- Local health departments administer nutrition programs, including WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), which provides direct client services, and the Nutrition Network, which focuses on community strategies to encourage healthy eating and physical activity.
- Public health departments are local lead agencies in tobacco education and prevention programs. Working in concert with the CDPH state level activities, local health departments have played a major role in the reduction of tobacco use in California.
- Local Maternal and Child and Adolescent Health (MCAH) programs provide services to at-risk pregnant women and new mothers connecting this population to services to improve health outcomes for their children. Public health nurses make home visits to at-risk new mothers and their babies to ensure that new families get the best possible start.
- Injury prevention programs, such as the buckle-up program, instruct parents on how to properly install car safety seats for their children. County public health promotion staff also work with community organizations and senior groups to offer exercise classes to increase seniors' flexibility and stability to prevent falls, a leading cause of serious injury for older adults.

Protect the Health of the Community

Routine inspections by county environmental health inspectors help to protect restaurant diners from food poisoning, swimmers from disease and provide a safe environment for all residents. Local environmental health staff:

- Inspect and permit restaurant and food establishments, multiple housing units, hazardous materials storage facilities, wells, septic tanks and community swimming pools.
- Oversee the clean-up of groundwater and property from hazardous material releases.
- Monitor solid waste transfer and disposal facilities. Monitor conditions at creeks, lakes and lagoons and beaches to be sure they are safe for recreational use.

**The cities of Berkeley, Long Beach and Pasadena also provide these essential public health services.*