
PROMOTING AND PROTECTING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES:

*A City Officials Guide to
Public Health*



NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY
& CITY HEALTH OFFICIALS

Acknowledgments

“Promoting and Protecting Healthy Communities: A City Officials Guide to Public Health” is the most recent in a series of publications presented by the National League of Cities’ Working Group on Homeland Security. This special task force was established in January 2002 by the NLC President to guide the organization’s work in preparing resources to help city officials carry out their new roles in ensuring hometown security. For more information and practical resources on homeland security, visit the NLC website at www.nlc.org.

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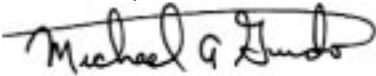
Dear City Official:

Since our nation's earliest days, government has worked on behalf of citizens to protect the health of the public. Achievements in public health have greatly reduced the spread of infectious diseases and helped us identify and modify unhealthy behaviors. But guarding communities against public health risks remains a serious challenge. In this post-9/11 world, the threats of man-made disaster and bioterrorism are pushing the public health system to adapt and redefine itself. The appearance of deadly diseases such as SARS issues a new wake-up call as well.

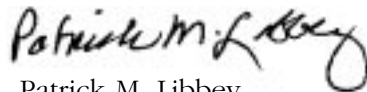
Serving today on the front line of homeland defense, you, as a city official, have a unique responsibility to understand and participate in your public health system. Whether or not your municipality has direct authority over the public health department that serves your citizens, you do have a role to play in promoting and protecting a healthy community.

The information in this booklet has been compiled to introduce you to the public health system, help define your roles in promoting and protecting public health, and prepare you to advocate for the most effective public health services possible for your citizens in these uncertain times. We hope that you will find it helpful as you continue to refine and strengthen your community's approach to homeland security.

Sincerely,



Michael A. Guido
Mayor, Dearborn, Michigan
Chair, NLC Working Group on
Homeland Security



Patrick M. Libbey
Executive Director,
National Association of County &
City Health Officials (NACCHO)

What is Public Health?

Experts have defined public health as “an organized community effort aimed at the prevention of disease and promotion of health.” Unlike our *health care* system, which provides services to *individual* citizens, our *public health* system focuses on the population *as a whole*. At the local level, public health is about promoting a healthy community.

Public health affects all of us, all of the time. Indeed, public health efforts have increased our life span by nearly 30 years during the past century. Today people live longer because public health activities have helped us recognize the effects and reduce the spread of infectious diseases that once cut life short for entire populations. Public health efforts are also teaching us to modify unhealthy behaviors that place us at risk for disease and premature death.

Simple actions we take for granted today such as drinking clean water and breathing clean air, eating a balanced breakfast, or wearing seatbelts, are benefits that we owe to the efforts of a system that is dedicated to making good health available to all of us.

The public health system involves many players. Government health departments have legal responsibility for ensuring public health and employ professionals, such as physicians, epidemiologists, social workers, nurses, and inspectors. Public health departments also rely on medical professionals in private practice to perform public health functions and help patients practice prevention. Police and fire departments play a crucial role in ensuring public safety and well-being, and even architects, housing developers, city planners, and traffic design specialists contribute through their everyday work to the safety and health of our communities. Neighborhood and nonprofit organizations also are part of the public health partnership.

The Main Functions of a Public Health System

While the structure of the public health system varies greatly from state to state, experts have identified the following as **core functions of an effective public health system**:

1. **Preventing Diseases** – Controlling and preventing disease – from infectious diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis, and now SARS, to chronic diseases such as diabetes and arthritis – are the major concerns of public health agencies. Public health agencies work with hospitals, nursing homes, schools, environmental health agencies, physicians, laboratories, citizens, and federal agencies to explore the cause and source of disease and to determine the appropriate response to outbreaks.
2. **Protecting Against Environmental Hazards** – Environmental health hazards – such as mercury, pesticides, air and water pollution, and lead – can have a

significant effect on the health of our population as a whole, but they are often undetected. Another goal of public health is to minimize the public's exposure to such environmental hazards. Health departments' work on environmental issues can include:

- Addressing hazardous air pollutants;
 - Protecting from exposure to asbestos and other toxins;
 - Assessing risk from chemicals;
 - Providing fluoridation services;
 - Managing hazardous material;
 - Screening and investigating lead exposure;
 - Establishing radon programs;
 - Managing solid and toxic waste; and,
 - Controlling water quality.
3. **Preventing Injuries** – Public health agencies implement strategies that can prevent many kinds of injuries. Safety and injury education programs cover a variety of injuries, from motor vehicle crashes and agricultural accidents to violence and suicide prevention. Examples of other activities include residential smoke detector installation programs and campaigns to improve seat belt use.
 4. **Promoting and Encouraging Healthy Behaviors** – Health departments educate communities in health and disease prevention areas such as nutrition and physical fitness, smoking cessation, and early detection of breast cancer. Agencies analyze which chronic disease risks are most common in their communities and then initiate activity to increase awareness and understanding of preventive measures, frequently working with the private sector, associations, and community groups to promote and provide education about healthy behaviors.
 5. **Responding to Disasters and Assisting Communities in Recovery** – Public health departments are involved in protecting the community from immediate and long-term effects of natural and man-made disasters. Health departments work with emergency management organizations to identify, respond to, and mitigate natural disasters and threats of bioterrorism.
 6. **Ensuring the Quality and Accessibility of Health Services** – Health departments evaluate medical capacity of communities, including quality of and accessibility to health services. Ensuring quality involves licensing of health facilities and workers. Ensuring access sometimes involves providing actual health care to people who lack insurance or cannot access private providers for services such as prenatal care, immunization, and pediatric dental care. Ensuring access can also involve coordinating among agencies to develop programs in health centers, schools, and communities, and establishing referral sources.

How the Public Health System is Structured

The “public health system” represents a wide collection of entities that collaborate and depend on one another. The structure of the public health system – *whose work is carried out by public health departments and agencies* – varies across the country by state.

Many cities, smaller as well as large, have their own health departments and/or boards of health. Some have consolidated city-county health departments. Some have arrangements whereby the smaller cities within a county perform some public health services, while the county or the state handles the remainder. Local public health is **centralized** in about one-quarter of the states, **decentralized** in about half the states, and arrangements are **mixed** and **shared** in the other quarter.

In a **centralized** system, the local health department is operated by the state health agency or board of health and functions directly under the state agency’s authority. Under a **decentralized** system, local governments have direct authority over local health departments, with or without a board of health. In the decentralized approach, local departments are required to meet state standards and follow state laws and regulations, but they can exercise certain powers to meet local needs. The local health department may work in partnership with the state public health agency, and the state agency may supervise the local agency, but the state agency generally does not provide public health services. Local health department authority is granted by the state in the form of police powers, which include the ability to quarantine, investigate disease outbreaks, and regulate facilities.

Mixed systems include states where local health services are provided by a combination of the state agency, local government, boards of health or health departments in other jurisdictions. In **shared** systems, the local health department operates under the shared authority of the state health agency, local government and board of health.

Elected Officials and Public Health

Many public health problems – such as infectious diseases and vehicle safety – require a national solution. Federal officials play a large role in public health by developing policies, setting standards, administering funds appropriated by Congress, conducting research, and providing technical assistance.

State legislators pass laws that shape public health activities, fund public health programs, and ensure that health agencies are accountable. A recent example of how legislation can impact public health is the establishment of state and local laws eliminating smoking in the workplace. Other examples include school immunization requirements, laws on reporting communicable disease infection, and laws restricting minors’ access to tobacco.

At the local level, elected officials play a critical role in public health as well because the laws, regulations, and ordinances they create help to make the community a healthier place. As leaders in a community, elected officials also help communicate important public health messages to the citizens they serve.

Local governments, including counties and cities, conduct most public health work because they are closer to the people they serve. At the local level, police powers enable governments to preserve and promote public health, even if it means limiting personal freedoms for the good of the community. Examples of such requirements include mandatory vaccination and screening for tuberculosis and enforcement of quarantine and isolation procedures, as well as inspections, licenses, and environmental and zoning restrictions in the private sector.

Special Roles for City Officials: Preparing for Public Health Emergencies

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, subsequent anthrax events in Fall 2001, and the more recent outbreaks of SARS, the role for local leaders in promoting public health has broadened and intensified. Even if your city or town does not have its own department of public health, city officials have a responsibility and opportunity to exercise local leadership by participating in the public health system.

Following are basic steps local elected officials must take in helping prepare their community for the types of public health emergencies that threaten hometown security:

- **Know how your community is served by the public health system.** Whether the department, agency, or board of health that serves your community is under city control, county, or state control, it is imperative that you learn about its capacity and limitations, that you build a relationship with the executive director and board members, and that you get involved in helping them address their needs. Ensure that local health agencies are at the table when the state makes their plans.
- Make sure that **your local emergency response plan includes this local public health agency.** Don't delegate this responsibility. YOU must ensure that this coordination is complete.
- Help get leverage out of the public health system by **having planning for bioterrorism combined with planning for other public health emergencies, such as SARS.** All emergency response plans should include plans for managing infectious disease outbreaks.
- Ensure that **law enforcement and the court system participate** in planning efforts since with the advent of bioterrorism a criminal act may be involved and law enforcement may be required to enforce quarantines.

- **Become familiar with state laws and local ordinances relating to quarantine/isolation** and regulations restricting the movement of people exposed to communicable diseases.
- Ensure that the **local health care and emergency response community is trained in identifying bioterrorist attacks and agents** and is familiar with the signs and symptoms of infectious diseases and illnesses likely to be caused by those agents. Training of local personnel must include protocols for reporting unusual illnesses to public health departments.
- **Become versed in “risk communications.”** Be honest about a challenge from the beginning so that you maintain credibility, share the pertinent information, and do not cause undue alarm in the community. Don’t hesitate to involve communications staff in all meetings about public health issues.
- **Strengthen communications by strengthening information technology.** Local public health departments must have the information and communication technology needed to respond effectively in a public health emergency, including surveillance technology, high-speed Internet and e-mail access, and secure radios. Ensure that a plan exists for setting up an immediate information network which might also include a hotline for public use, a website, and regular press briefings.
- **Evaluate regional approaches for the future.** The increased urgency for public health preparedness planning is causing cities and counties to take a regional approach to be more effective. Examine how your system works on a regional basis and consider the potential for more shared services and resources.

For More Information About Public Health in Your State ...

Because the structure and relationships within the public health system vary so greatly from state to state, city officials should take time to learn more about their local public health authority. Continue your research by using this directory of state health agencies.

Alabama Department of Public Health

<http://www.adph.org/>

Alaska Division of Public Health/ Department of Health and Social Services

<http://health.hss.state.ak.us/>

Arizona Department of Health Services

<http://www.hs.state.az.us/>

Arkansas Department of Health

<http://www.healtharkansas.com/>

California Department of Health Services

<http://www.dhs.cahw.net.gov/>

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

<http://www.cdph.state.co.us/cdphehom.asp>

Connecticut Department of Public Health

<http://www.dph.state.ct.us/>

Delaware Division of Public Health

<http://www.state.de.us/dhss/dph/index.htm>

District of Columbia Department of Health

<http://dchealth.dc.gov/index.asp>

Florida Department of Health

<http://www.doh.state.fl.us/>

Georgia Division of Public Health/ Georgia Department of Human Resources

<http://www.ph.dhr.state.ga.us/>

Hawaii Department of Health

<http://www.state.hi.us/health/>

Idaho Division of Health/Idaho Department of Health and Welfare

<http://www2.state.id.us/dhw/health/index.htm>

Illinois Department of Public Health

<http://www.idph.state.il.us/>

Indiana Department of Health

<http://www.in.gov/isdh/>

Iowa Department of Public Health

<http://idph.state.ia.us/>

Kansas Department of Health and Environment

<http://www.kdhe.state.ks.us/>

Kentucky Department of Health Services

<http://chs.ky.gov/publichealth/>

Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals

<http://www.oph.dhh.state.la.us/>

Maine State Bureau of Health

<http://www.state.me.us/dhs/boh/index.htm>

Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

<http://www.dhmm.state.md.us/>

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

<http://www.state.ma.us/dph/dphhome.htm>

Michigan Department of Community Health

<http://www.michigan.gov/mdch>

Minnesota Department of Health

<http://www.health.state.mn.us/>

Mississippi State Department of Health

<http://www.msdh.state.ms.us/>

Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services

<http://www.health.state.mo.us/>

Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services

<http://www.dphhs.state.mt.us/>

Nebraska Health and Human Services System

<http://www.hhs.state.ne.us/>

Nevada State Health Division

<http://health2k.state.nv.us/>

New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services

http://www.dhhs.state.nh.us/DHHS/DHHS_SITE/default.htm

New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services

<http://www.state.nj.us/health/>

New Mexico Department of Health

<http://www.health.state.nm.us/website.nsf/frames?ReadForm>

New York State Department of Health

<http://www.health.state.ny.us/>

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services

<http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/>

North Dakota Department of Health

<http://www.health.state.nd.us/>

Ohio Department of Health

<http://www.odh.state.oh.us/>

Oklahoma State Department of Health

<http://www.health.state.ok.us/>

Oregon Department of Human Services

<http://www.ohd.hr.state.or.us/>

Pennsylvania Department of Health

<http://www.health.state.pa.us/>

Puerto Rico Department of Health

(in Spanish only)

<http://www.salud.gov.pr/>

Rhode Island Department of Health

<http://www.health.state.ri.us/>

South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control

<http://www.scdhec.net/>

South Dakota State Department of Health

<http://www.state.sd.us/doh/>

Tennessee Department of Health

<http://www.state.tn.us/health/>

Texas Department of Health

<http://www.tdh.texas.gov/>

Utah Department of Health

<http://health.utah.gov/>

Vermont Department of Health

<http://www.state.vt.us/health>

Virginia Department of Health

<http://www.vdh.state.va.us/>

Washington State Department of Health

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/>

West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources

<http://www.wvdhhr.org/>

Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services

<http://www.dhfs.state.wi.us/>

Wyoming Department of Health

<http://wdh.state.wy.us/main/index.asp>



National League of Cities
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The National League of Cities (NLC) is the oldest and largest national organization representing municipal governments throughout the United States. Its mission is to strengthen and promote cities as centers of opportunity, leadership, and governance.



National Association of County and City Health Officials
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www.naccho.org

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) is the national organization representing local public health agencies (including city, county, metro, district, and tribal agencies). NACCHO works to support efforts which protect and improve the health of all people and all communities by promoting national policy, developing resources and programs, and supporting effective local public health practice and systems.