

Public Health

A publication of the Association of Minnesota Counties

Protecting the health of the public is a fundamental responsibility of government. State and local governmental public health departments are assigned specific duties and authorities to fulfill governmental responsibilities for public health.

Local Public Health Act

Minnesota carries out this responsibility through a unique partnership between state and local government. The state commissioner of health is statutorily responsible for developing and maintaining an organized system for protecting, maintaining, and improving the health of the public. The state health department shares responsibility for protecting the public's health with 50 Community Health Boards, composed of single county, multi-county, and four city health departments. The legal authority for local public health is contained in Minnesota Statutes Chapter 145A, the Local Public Health Act.

All counties have some basic responsibilities as boards of health. Under MS 145A, counties that form "community health boards" are eligible for the Community Health Services (CHS) subsidy from the state, if they meet certain organizational, planning and population requirements. In 2002, the CHS subsidy was awarded to community health boards covering all 87 Minnesota Counties and four suburban Hennepin County cities.



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

CORE FUNCTIONS

Government is responsible for certain core functions of public health. These core functions are assessment, policy development and assurance. As local elected officials, county commissioners implement the core functions through:

- **ASSESSMENT (Determination):** Elected officials, with input from a variety of sources, including county staff, identify community needs and policy issues.
- **POLICY DEVELOPMENT:** Elected officials make decisions regarding policy direction necessary to meet community needs and expectations.
- **ASSURANCE (Administration):** Elected officials are responsible for oversight of the policies that have put into place to protect and improve the public's health.

ESSENTIAL ACTIVITIES

- Monitor the health statutes of the population.
- Promote health behaviors.
- Link high-risk disadvantaged people to needed services.
- Prevent epidemic and the spread of disease.
- Prevent injuries.
- Assure the quality, accessibility, and accountability of health care.
- Protect the environment, workplaces, housing, food and water.
- Respond to disasters.
- Mobilize community action for health.
- Provide leadership in the development of sound health policy and planning.

FOR YOUR KNOWLEDGE INFORMATION

The Value of Public Health

Over the past century many of the dramatic gains in health status and life expectancy can be attributed to public health improvements. Efforts to improve drinking water quality, food safety and sanitary conditions have greatly enhanced quality of life while reducing the need for expensive medical care.

Disease epidemics that plagued previous generations have been virtually wiped out due to widespread immunizations and active disease prevention and control surveillance efforts. The evidence demonstrates that investing in prevention and health promotion strategies does reduce cost to the taxpayer. For example, for every diphtheria/tetanus shot given, \$17 is saved to the public. Equally dramatic, for every \$1 spent on pregnant women in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutritional program saves \$4.21 in Medicaid costs for newborns and their mothers.

Recent bioterrorism threats have illustrated that strong public health infrastructure is critical for county government to meet the public's demand for safe and healthy communities. Responding to emergencies and disasters, promoting healthy behaviors, preventing the spread of disease, are vital components of the community's health care infrastructure.

Future Demands of the Public Health System

The public health system in Minnesota has demonstrated great success. However, the uncertainties of the future present counties with even greater challenges to protecting the public health. With the increased use of antibiotics and genetic manipulation we are now seeing resistant strains of viruses that can have devastating impacts on communities. The 2001 Anthrax attacks highlight the need for interactive information systems and emergency response systems to respond to bioterrorism and other emergency health threats.

Increasingly counties are faced with the burdens of inadequate housing, violence, youth alcohol and tobacco use, emerging infectious diseases, foodborn illnesses and other threats to the public's health. It is critical that the public health system at the local level has the capacity necessary to effectively respond to ever changing demands.



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