

Oregon's Public Health Builds on Coalitions

Elizabeth Rink

The state of public health in the Northwest is changing. We are faced with many challenges, such as balancing budgets, planning for bioterrorism, addressing obesity, providing health care to a growing medically underserved population, and implementing public health programs to meet the needs of our changing demographics, particularly in rural areas of the Northwest.

In Oregon dramatic changes in demographics, economy, and community level health indicators have severely affected the state's public health system. For example, Oregon has seen a dramatic increase in its Hispanic population. In some counties the Hispanic growth rate since 1990 has been 254 percent, and in others it has more than doubled. In 2003 the Oregon Legislature cut millions of dollars from Oregon's Tobacco Prevention and Education Program, despite the fact that tobacco-related health problems cost Oregon \$1.8 billion annually in expenses and lost productivity. Oregon is one of only four states west of the Rocky Mountains with adult obesity rates over 20 percent. According to the United Health Foundation, Oregon ranks 48th in the United States in support of public health and spends less than 2.4 percent of its gross state product on health care.

Benton County's success in addressing these challenges over the past several years are due not just to the work of public health professionals but, in a large part, to local community-based coalitions, which challenge us to provide public health services, support the Benton County Health Department's decisions and initiatives, and hold the bar high for what they want to see accomplished in our community.

Located in the heart of Oregon's Willamette Valley, Benton County is the smallest county in the state, encompassing only 679 square miles. Corvallis is the county seat and largest city in the county, with other smaller towns scattered through the county's rural areas. The economy depends primarily on agriculture and forestry in the rural areas. In the Corvallis metropolitan area, Hewlett Packard is the largest employer, closely followed by Oregon State University. Other major employers include Samaritan Health Services, the Corvallis School District, and smaller industries in timber, manufacturing, tourism, and agriculture. Visitors to Benton County may gaze on Corvallis's tree-lined streets, stroll along the Willamette River and the newly

developed waterfront park, frequent the county's bountiful nurseries and well-maintained natural areas and parks, and perceive Benton County as a community with no problems.

Yet in 2003, Benton County was designated a medically underserved community. The 2001 census estimated that 14.6 percent of the county residents lived below the 100 percent federal poverty level, compared with 11.6 percent in Oregon. Approximately 60 percent of the clients at the Benton County Health Department report having no insurance, 32 percent report having public medical assistance as the primary insurance coverage, and 8 percent report having private insurance coverage. Key health indicators in Benton County include an 8.5 per 100,000 infant mortality rate compared to 5.8 per 100,000 in Oregon, 7.5 per 100,000 suicide rate among adolescents compared to 6.1 per 100,000 statewide, and a death rate of children between 1 to 14 years of age of 23.4 per 100,000 compared to 20.3 per 100,000 in Oregon. In addition 35 percent of Benton County residents are overweight, and 14 percent are obese. Chlamydia is rampant among our 13- to 25-year-olds. During its first year of operation, the Benton County Harm Reduction Program exchanged 30,000 needles. Indeed, there are problems in Benton County.

Coalitions create solutions

Benton County's public health system is flourishing, despite budget cuts and staff reductions over the past three years. At the core of Benton County's successful public health process are coalitions. Where we are involved in public health in Benton County, we are involved in at least one coalition. The strength of the many coalitions working with the Benton County Health Department is the ability of their diverse members to find common ground in the context of their diversity.

The eight coalitions and three advisory groups working with the Benton County Health Department (*see box for a list of the coalitions*) vary in how long they have been in existence, what they work on, how they work on their coalition activities, and how frequently they meet. The four coalitions described below demonstrate the range of focus and activities.

Due in large part to the work of our **Safety**

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Net Provider Committee, a coalition of organizations and medical providers, the Benton County Health Department became a federally qualified health center in the spring of 2004 in order to begin providing primary care to the county's medically underserved residents. The planning effort for the health center was community-based, emphasizing assessment of the county's migrant and seasonal farm worker population as well as the wider community population. The Benton County Health Department and the Safety Net Committee have conducted two planning sessions and 22 bimonthly meetings since spring 2002 and held other meetings involving the Benton County Health Department management team and Benton County commissioners. The planning process included a study of the health care market, the local resources, and needs and services gaps.

In 1993 the **Benton County Tobacco Free Coalition** was founded and has been at the forefront of tobacco control and prevention throughout the state of Oregon for the past 11 years. Corvallis and Philomath are two of only three cities in the state that have smoke-free workplace ordinances. Philomath School District has received the gold standard award in tobacco prevention education and policy implementation from Oregon Health Services Chronic Disease Prevention Program. The Tobacco Free Coalition is so strong that the group's advocacy and testimony to local elected officials enabled the health department's tobacco prevention program to remain in place, despite the state cuts to tobacco prevention funding. The Coalition is made up of five to six core coalition members, with another five to six members who come to coalition meetings once or twice a year. It has met every month for 11 years.

The **Benton County Breast and Cervical Cancer Coalition** began in 1998 and has produced two booklets of breast cancer survivor stories—the *Unexpected Challenge* and *Transitions*—sponsored local events such as Pink Ribbon Teas and the showing of *Rachel's Daughters*, assisted in the implementation of breast cancer prevention programs for Hispanic and Asian/Asian Pacific Islander women, and raised \$11,000 for mammography vouchers for women who cannot afford breast screenings. Virtually all of the Breast and Cervical Cancer Coalition work gets done outside coalition meetings. This coalition of 20 active professional women, providers, community volunteers, and cancer survivors meets every other month.

In 2002 a group of retired school personnel, local gym owners, physical activity specialists, dieticians, doctors, and nurses came together to form the **Benton County Healthy Weight and**

Lifestyles Coalition in response to the growing obesity epidemic in Oregon. This Coalition was the first of its kind in Oregon. Its perspective on obesity prevention varies from focusing on portion size to encouraging people to bike to work. With a small grant from the Eriklla Foundation, in 2004 the group produced a resource guide on local resources for low- or no-cost physical activity in Benton County. Other projects include implementing a Walk-to-School-Day with the Benton County school districts and promoting the 5-A-Day campaign and pedometer programs in local businesses. And slowly but surely the group is beginning to address vendors and food sales in the schools.

In order to adapt to the dynamic landscape of public health, public health practitioners at the state and local level must look to coalitions as resources for advocacy in the political arena as well as for developing and implementing collaborative public health programs. The benefit of developing and maintaining coalitions to work with state and local health departments on issues is that they enhance the public health system's ability to identify issues, mobilize action on them, and address the overall health of the community. Coalition work, and the dedication of the community members who serve on coalitions, will continue to help improve the state of public health in Oregon. 🐾

Author

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Benton County Health Department Coalitions and Advisory Committees

Breast and Cervical Cancer Coalition

- Mammography voucher program
- Community-based education projects

Diabetes Project

- Diabetes prevention education
- Self-Management

Healthy Weight and Lifestyles Coalition

- Walk-to-School-Day
- Advocacy in county school districts for healthy food choices
- Active community environments

Benton County Tobacco Free Coalition

- Tobacco-free environments
- Tobacco prevention and control policies and programs

HIV Prevention and Care Planning Committee

- Community planning and advocacy for HIV prevention and care

Asian-Pacific Islander Health Council

- Promotes Asian health and wellness through a lay advisors program

Biomedical Planning Team

- Public health emergency planning

Family Planning Advisory Committee

- MARS (Male Advocates for Responsible Sexuality)
- STARS (Students Today Aren't Ready for Sex)
- Oversight of federally funded family planning

Emergency Medical Advisory Committee

- Emergency medical services oversight

Public Health Advisory Committee

- Public health strategic planning
- Public health policy advisement
- Community advocacy for public health