

Developing an Evidence Base

By Susan Allan

It is striking how greatly health departments vary, both in their activities and in their structures. Most public health practices are based on general principles associated with improvements in the health of populations. And most public health programs are to some extent “data driven” because they are based on information about their communities and may even include some outcome evaluation and quality improvement analysis. Yet the real “evidence base” for public health practices is limited. There have been few rigorous studies to demonstrate either the absolute effectiveness or the comparative effectiveness of the specific programs, activities, and services that are basic to most health departments.

There is increasing attention to the need for a stronger evidence base for public health. This is driven by several factors.

- Demand for increased “accountability” from governmental services
- Limited resources
- New accreditation standards depend on measures of excellence in public health practices and systems.

A number of promising activities currently underway will help develop better evidence for public health practices, and plus develop skills, methods and systems that are necessary for advancing this field of inquiry. Some of the key activities include:

Public Health Systems and Services Research (PHSSR). This recently emerging field examines the organization, financing, and delivery of public health services, and the impact of these services on public health.

PHSSR research funded by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has been an important promoter and funder of PHSSR activities. RWJF periodically issues calls for proposals for PHSSR, and has funded projects since 2006.

Preparedness and Emergency Response Research Centers (PERRCs). These seven centers were

established by COTPER at CDC (Coordinating Office for Terrorism Preparedness and Emergency Response) in October 2008 to evaluate the structure, capabilities, and performance of public health systems for preparedness and emergency response. The Northwest PERRC is housed in the Northwest Center for Public Health Practice at the University of Washington School of Public Health. Two additional PERRCs will be funded in October 2009.

Public Health Practice Based Research Networks (PBRNs). Another Johnson Foundation program is the development of Public Health Practice Based Research Networks. Five were funded in early 2009, including the Washington PBRN. A public health PBRN is a group of public health agencies that collaborate with public health research centers to identify ways of improving the organization, financing, and delivery of public health services.

Advanced Practice Centers (APCs). The Advanced Practice Centers (APC) Program is a network of local health departments that develop tools and resources for public health preparedness and response which are subject to continuous and independent evaluation. The program, which began in 2004, is sponsored by the National Association of County and City Health Officials and funded by CDC/COTPER. Two of the APCs funded for the upcoming year are in the Pacific Northwest: Public Health - Seattle & King County (WA), and the Multnomah County Health Department (OR).



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“The WA PBRN’s top research priority is assessing the impact of funding cuts on health outcomes. To what extent are evidence-based practices prioritized?”

- Karen Hartfield, WA PBRN Coordinator

For further reading, see the annotated bibliography at www.nwpublichealth.org