

Define “Foundational” Capabilities of Public Health Departments

Current Status:

Public health departments around the country have the unique role and responsibility for improving health in schools, workplaces and neighborhoods, through identifying the top health problems and developing strategies for improvement.

As of 2012, however, the field of public health faces a new set of challenges and opportunities, including:

- Changes in the overall health system that emphasizes cost containment and improved health, and expansion of the number of individuals with insurance coverage for direct preventive services;
- Massive budget and workforce cuts at all levels of government;
- A growing focus on accountability, with higher expectations for demonstrating a return on investment in terms of cost and health improvement. This includes a movement toward accreditation to ensure that all health departments meet and can demonstrate a standardized set of core capabilities; and
- Adoption of new technologies, including electronic health records, which could allow public health to integrate and analyze data with the health system and other sectors to better identify health patterns, causes and cures for health problems, and “hot spot” areas with high rates of chronic diseases and costs.

Why Public Health Departments Matter:

- Where you live shouldn't determine how healthy you are, and public health departments serve as the unique and essential component of an integrated health sys-

tem that looks out for the population as a whole, rather than focusing on the health outcomes of individuals alone.

- Public health is responsible for identifying the biggest, highest cost health problems and developing the most effective strategies for improving health.
- Public health departments bring together partners in states, counties, cities and communities around the country to assess community-specific needs, and to plan and implement activities designed to improve health outcomes and reduce health care expenditures.
- Public health plays an essential role in protecting Americans' health from threats ranging from bioterrorism to infectious disease outbreaks to extreme weather events.

Recommendations:

- ▲ **Strengthen the role of Health Departments as the chief health strategist in communities:** In response to the new challenges and opportunities confronting our nation in 2013, public health departments must assume greater accountability for the design and development of the overall strategic plan for improving health in communities. To do this, health departments must clearly establish their value and role in a reformed health system — especially in the identification, implementation, coordination and evaluation of cost-beneficial prevention programs and activities. Strengthening this role will also require a greater focus on efficient, effective practices for structure, organization, finance and delivery of public health,

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including on-going public health services and systems research to identify new evidence-based practice and approaches.

- ▲ **Define, prioritize and fully fund a set of foundational capabilities for public health departments at all levels of government:** Public health departments need the tools and skills that are necessary to provide basic public protections while adapting to and effectively addressing changing health threats. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the Transforming Public Health project, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), identified some of these foundational capabilities as developing policy, using integrated data assets, communicating with the public and other audiences to disseminate information, mobilizing the community and forging partnerships, cultivating leadership skills, demonstrating accountability and protecting the public in the event of an emergency or disaster.^{1,2} Ensuring these foundational capabilities should become a primary focus of federal, state and local funding, even if it means restructuring some categorical funding streams, and funding must be maintained at a level to guarantee these capabilities can be effectively maintained and delivered.
- ▲ **Prioritize accountability for achieving and maintaining foundational capabilities through accreditation and other mechanisms:** Accreditation, continuous quality improvement and transparency are important parts of ensuring these foundational capabilities are met and maintained. Specifically, achieving voluntary accreditation from the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) is a process where governmental public health departments can begin to demonstrate core competencies and accountability. In the future, accreditation could also be used as an important mechanism for states and localities to more easily and efficiently demonstrate that they have met the capabilities required for federal funding opportunities.
- ▲ **Integrate with health care providers to contain costs and improve health:** Public health departments must adapt to work with new entities and financing mechanisms in the reformed health system, such as by working with Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) or within new capitalized care structures and global health budgets, to help improve health beyond the doctor's office.

- ▲ **Partner with other sectors and members of the community to make healthier choices easier in our schools, workplaces and neighborhoods:** Public health officials must work with other sectors, such as education, transportation and housing, to capitalize on the many opportunities to promote health and wellness where Americans live, learn, work and play.

- ▲ **Develop a public health workforce to meet modern demands:** The future public health workforce should be more versatile and better equipped to handle various public health challenges or threats. This workforce should have policy development skills, management/administrative skills, technological skills and communications skills needed to create the foundational capabilities that all health departments should have. Public health workers also must be able to draw from and work with other fields and overlapping disciplines such as education, transportation and the environment and receive continued re-training and professional development opportunities to meet evolving needs. In addition:

- **The public health workforce measures in the Affordable Care Act (ACA) must be fully funded and implemented;**
- **Public health curricula and job re-training must include developing skills in Health Information Technology (HIT), policy and legal areas, and cross-sector management; and**
- **Training programs for health workers, including community health workers and HIT professionals, and in other sectors where programs impact health must emphasize the need for multiple sectors to work in coordination.**

- ▲ **Use modern technology to improve the ability to identify top health problems in a community and determine their causes and cures:** New data systems and electronic health records (EHRs) have the potential to revolutionize health tracking by making it possible to collect and analyze health data in real-time and allow interactive communication among providers, health departments and other sectors. Instead of continuing to have a series of siloed systems to track different diseases and other health problems, connecting different sources of data so they are interoperable and available in real-time could lead to breakthroughs in identifying health trends and patterns. In addition, public health must monitor a range of factors — from educational attainment to employment — that impact health outcomes even if they are not under the direct purview of public health.

▲ **Public health departments should only pay for direct services when they cannot be paid for by insurance:** Some public health departments provide direct services in their community along with other preventive programs. Since the ACA will expand the number of individuals with coverage and expand what services are covered by many insurance

providers, public health departments should reassess their role in the direct provision of medical services (including the option of becoming a Federally Qualified Health Center), to ensure that they do not use their public health budgets to pay for services that could be billed to insurers or could be paid for through health center dollars.

DEFINING FOUNDATIONAL CAPABILITIES FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

In their April 2012 report, *For the Public's Health: Investing in a Healthier Future*, the IOM called for increased focus and prioritization among governmental public health agencies. They identified a set of “foundational capabilities” that included:³

- Information systems and resources;
- Health planning;
- Partnership development and community mobilization;
- Policy development analysis and decision support;
- Communication; and
- Public health research, evaluation and quality improvement.

Following the IOM report, a group of leading public health experts participated in the Transforming Public Health project, an initiative funded by RWJF to develop guidance for public health officials and policymakers to prioritize vital public health functions in a shifting political landscape.⁴

They summarized the foundational capabilities of public health as:

- Developing policy to effectively promote and improve health;
- Using integrated data sets for assessment, surveillance and evaluation to identify crucial health challenges, best practices and better health;
- Communicating with the public and other audiences to disseminate and receive information in an effective manner for health, including health promotion opportunities, access to care and prevention.
- Mobilizing the community and forging partnerships to leverage resources (funding and otherwise);
- Building new models that integrate clinical and population health;
- Cultivating leadership, organization, management and business skills needed to build and sustain an effective health department and workforce to effectively and efficiently promote and improve health;

- Demonstrating accountability for what governmental public health does directly and for those things that it oversees through accreditation, continuous quality improvement and transparency; and

- Protecting the public in the event of an emergency or disaster, as well as responding to day-to-day challenges or threats, with a cross-trained workforce.

The project also identified a set of additional important issues for public health departments to consider, which include:

- Maintaining a culture of continuous quality improvement;
- Improving coordination across all levels of government to foster synergy and efficiency;
- Building a better and cross-trained workforce that is more versatile and well equipped to handle a range of public health needs;
- Bolstering research, by capitalizing on improved technology to access and analyze data, to better demonstrate the value of public health and prevention services and programs; and
- Ensuring sufficient, stable and sustainable funding for public health, including leveraging resources from non-traditional sources that also have an interest in improving health, such as across government agencies and from the health care sector, private industry, non-profit fundraising and community development.

The project stressed that “prioritizing is the only way to take on new challenges in a time of declining resources.” To be successful in the future, public health should focus on:⁵

- Ensuring what is being done is being done as well and as efficiently as possible;
- Coordinating across all levels of the governmental public health system and other government agencies and jurisdictions to maximize impact; and
- Cultivating and/or training a workforce that can deliver foundational capabilities when implementing programs.

PUBLIC HEALTH ACCREDITATION

The PHAB, created in 2007, has created a voluntary public health accreditation program for state and local public health departments.⁶ This accreditation process is a major effort to improve and standardize core capabilities of health departments.

The PHAB administers the national public health department accreditation program for public health departments operated by Tribes, states, local jurisdictions and territories.⁷ PHAB accreditations include domains (groups of standards that pertain to a broad group of public health services), standards (the required level of achievement that a health department is expected to meet), and measures (evaluation tools for meeting standards).

There are 12 domains. The first ten domains address the 10 Essential Public Health Services; domain 11 addresses management and administration, and domain 12 addresses governance.⁸

The 12 domains include:

Domain 1: Conduct and disseminate assessments focused on population health status and public health issues facing the community.

Domain 2: Investigate health problems and environmental public health hazards to protect the community.

Domain 3: Inform and educate about public health issues and function.

Domain 4: Engage with the community to identify and address health problems.

Domain 5: Develop public health policies and plans.

Domain 6: Enforce Public Health Laws.

Domain 7: Promote strategies to improve access to health care services.

Domain 8: Maintain a competent public health workforce.

Domain 9: Evaluate and continuously improve health department processes, programs and interventions.

Domain 10: Contribute to and apply the evidence base of public health.

Domain 11: Maintain administrative and management capacity.

Domain 12: Maintain capacity to engage the public health governing entity.

Standard 5.4 focuses specifically on preparedness and requires that public health departments maintain an all hazards emergency operations plan. In order to become accredited, a health department must:⁹

- Participate in the process for the development and maintenance of an All Hazards Emergency Operations Plan (EOP);
- Adopt and maintain a public health EOP; and
- Provide consultation and/or technical assistance to Tribal and local health departments in the state regarding evidence-based and/or promising practices/templates in EOP development and testing.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Institute of Medicine. *For the Public's Health: Investing in a Healthier Future*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, April 2012.
- 2 RESOLVE. "Transforming Public Health: Emerging Concepts for Decision Making in a Changing Public Health World." 2012.
- 3 Institute of Medicine. *For the Public's Health: Investing in a Healthier Future*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, April 2012.
- 4 RESOLVE. "Transforming Public Health: Emerging Concepts for Decision Making in a Changing Public Health World." 2012.

5 Ibid.

6 Welcome to the Public Health Accreditation Board. In *Public Health Accreditation Board*. <http://www.phaboard.org/> (accessed November 9, 2012).

7 Public Health Accreditation Board. *Standards and Measures*. Alexandria, VA: Public Health Accreditation Board, 2011.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.