

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ESSENTIAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF LOCAL HEALTH OFFICERS

INTRODUCTION

The objective of the health officer manual is to support effective public health practice of local health officers by providing a collection of relevant guidance documents related to issues that health officers are likely to encounter. Although many of the documents are available in various locations and websites, the collection allows the local health officer to find many items in one location. These documents support the health officer role and local response to various environmental health related conditions. The 2011 Health Officer Manual will be periodically updated as newer versions of guidance documents become available.

Essential Roles and Responsibilities of Health Officers

The goal of public health is to maintain and improve the health and well-being of all New Hampshire residents. Public health succeeds when the span of healthy life and the quality of life are increased.

“Environmental health focuses on the interrelationships between people and their environment, promotes human health and well-being, and fosters a safe and healthy environment”

-National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) 1998

Health Officers have a public health role that often has an environmental health component. Several documents from the Division of Public Health Services (DPHS) and the NH Department of Environmental Services (NH DES) in the Health Officer manual demonstrate this dual role.

We define public health as a system – the organizations and people that contribute to and support achieving improvements in health. The concept of a public health system describes a complex network of individuals and organizations that have the potential to play a significant role in creating the conditions for health. The component parts of a potential system can act for health individually, but when they work together toward a health goal, they act as a true system - a public health system.

The importance of an effective local public health system recognizes that health improvement is best achieved at local and regional levels. Communities can identify health problems, galvanize a community or regional response, and devise appropriate solutions based on available resources.

Local health officials have a critical role in effective local and regional environmental and public health systems and are responsible for three critical functions.

- The first is to enforce applicable New Hampshire laws and administrative rules (i.e. regulations), as well as local ordinances and regulations enacted by your community.
- The second critical function is to serve as a liaison between state officials, local elected officials, and your community on issues concerning local environmental and public health.
- The third is to be a leader and active participant in efforts to develop regional environmental and public health capacities. These roles have become more important than ever as our state faces continuing outbreaks of disease and demands greater emphasis on public health emergency preparedness.

The practice of public health at local, state, and national levels is defined by the Ten Essential Public Health Services. In order to effectively implement these essential services, public health system partners must coordinate and collaborate to maximize their capabilities, resources, and strengths. By doing so, we will collectively improve the conditions that result in improved health and engage residents to improve their personal health and the health of their community.

THE TEN ESSENTIAL PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES*

The 10 Essential Public Health Services describe the public health activities that all communities should undertake and serve as the framework for the National Public Health Performance Standards. Public health systems should:

1. **Monitor** health status to identify community health problems.
 2. **Diagnose and investigate** health problems and health hazards in the community.
 3. **Inform, educate, and empower** people about health issues.
 4. **Mobilize** community partnerships to identify and solve health problems.
 5. **Develop policies and plans** that support individual and community health efforts.
 6. **Enforce** laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety.
 7. **Link** people to needed personal health services and assure the provision of health care when otherwise unavailable.
 8. **Assure** a competent public health and personal health care workforce.
 9. **Evaluate** effectiveness, accessibility and quality of personal and population-based health services.
 10. **Research** for new insights and innovative solutions to health problems
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THE TEN ESSENTIAL ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

The 2002 Institute of Medicine report, *The Future of the Public's Health in the 21st Century*, reaffirmed the importance of local and state health agencies to strengthen their capacity to successfully identify and manage environmental problems through the understanding and use of the 10 Essential Public Health Services. The 10 Essential Services of Environmental Health builds upon the 10 Essential Public Health Services as follows:

1. **Monitor** environmental and health status to identify community environmental health problems.
2. **Diagnose and investigate** environmental health problems and health hazards in the community.
3. **Inform, educate, and empower** people about environmental health issues.
4. **Mobilize** community partnerships to identify and solve environmental health problems.
5. **Develop policies and plans** that support individual and community environmental health efforts.
6. **Enforce** laws and regulations that protect environmental health and ensure safety.
7. **Link** people to needed personal environmental health services and assure the provision of health care when otherwise unavailable.
8. **Assure** a competent environmental health and personal health care workforce.
9. **Evaluate** effectiveness, accessibility and quality of personal and population-based environmental health services.
10. **Research** for new insights and innovative solutions to environmental health problems.

EXAMPLES OF LOCAL HEALTH OFFICIALS' ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

COMMUNICABLE DISEASES:

- Health Officers may be called upon to assist the DPHS, Bureau of Communicable Disease as requested during disease outbreaks. A primary role is to assist in disseminating educational materials throughout your city or town.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE:

- Health Officers should contact their local Emergency Management Director, to both participate in the development of local Emergency Operations Plans, and discuss their role within the community's existing plan. Health officers also act as liaisons to local citizens by linking them to state, local and federal resources and by distributing educational materials from the state and federal agencies during the response to, and recovery from, an emergency. Health officers should also participate in regional public health planning initiatives.

PUBLIC EDUCATION:

- Health Officers are often well positioned to take advantage of opportunities to provide education to residents, local officials, and public health system partners. This is achieved by disseminating materials produced by local, state and national partners, sharing your expertise with individuals and groups in your community, and educating local officials and other partners about important environmental health issues and needs.

PUBLIC HEALTH NUISANCES:

- Health Officers may conduct sanitary investigations into complaints and nuisances that may endanger public health. These may include garbage, insects, unsanitary living conditions, rodents, and safe drinking water inspections.

SEPTIC SYSTEMS:

- Health Officers may inspect septic systems to determine if a system has failed and, when necessary, coordinate with the NH Department of Environmental Services to certify septic system failure. The health officer may perform a dye test and a test of suspected sewage to confirm system failure. Depending on town ordinances, a health officer may also witness test pits, inspect repaired and new system installations, and review and approve septic system design plans. Many health officers report that becoming licensed as a septic system installer and/or designer is good preparation for this role.

RENTAL HOUSING (RSA 48A):

- Health Officer may enforce minimum standards for rental housing, including: safe drinking water, availability of hot water, garbage control, properly functioning septic systems, vermin control, adequate heat, and that walls and roofs do not leak.

HEALTH FACILITIES:

- Health Officers inspect new or modified health facilities to certify that they meet local health codes. These include hospitals, nursing homes, massage therapy establishments, and health club facilities.

CHILDCARE\FOSTER HOMES:

- Health Officers inspect\approve facilities used to provide childcare and the homes of people serving as foster parents to assure they meet local health codes. Many times these inspections are done in conjunction with representatives from local fire and zoning departments.

FOOD-BORNE ILLNESS:

- Health Officers may respond to complaints and report cases of suspected or known violations of the Food Code to the DPHS Food Protection Section.
- In conjunction with the DPHS Food Protection Section, health officers may be asked to contact food service establishments in the event of a food-borne disease outbreak.

MOSQUITO BORNE ILLESSES:

- Health Officers play an important role in disseminating educational materials to the community regarding West Nile Virus and Eastern Equine Encephalitis.

RABIES:

- Health Officers serve as a local resource for information on rabies.

LEAD:

- Health Officers may conduct lead paint poisoning inspections with a DPHS lead inspector upon request. The DPHS Health Homes Lead Poisoning Prevention Program may also request that a local health officer verify whether lead hazard reduction activities are taking place, or check to determine if a child under the age of 5 resides in a particular dwelling unit.

DRINKING WATER:

- Health Officers may test any public\private water supply suspected of being unsafe, per directives from the Department of Environmental Services.

PUBLIC SWIMMING PLACES:

- Health Officers may test water per directives from the Department of Environmental Services.

SMOKING:

- Health Officers may be asked to follow up on complaints and violations of the smoking law, at the request of DPHS.

There will be more detailed information on these and other topic areas included in the Health Officers' Manual.

A FEW BASIC TIPS FOR HEALTH OFFICERS

WHEN SERVING AS A LOCAL HEALTH OFFICER OR DEPUTY:

- Keep a log to document complaints, and your response to them. Include notes on phone calls, e-mails, and other actions you take to respond.
- Keep a hard-copy file on all cases and inspections. Many health officers now back this up with electronic copies as well.
- Carry a camera to take pictures if necessary when you are in the field.
- For additional support during inspections, take a second person with you. This could be a selectman (who under state law is a member of the local Board of Health), another town official such as a building inspector, police officer, animal control officer or your deputy health officer. Call and consult with the Health Officer Liaison for support and clarification of applicable state regulations. Site visits can also be made by the Health Officer Liaison for consultation on challenging situations.
- For continuity between health officers, when your term is completed, please meet with the new health officer to pass on your manual and files. Brief the new health officer on any cases that are not resolved that they may be involved in.

We thank you for your service to your community and to the State of New Hampshire in fulfilling the role of health officer and/or deputy health officer.

For more information:

Department of Health and Human Services
Division of Public Health Services
Bureau of Public Health Protection
Health Officer Liaison Unit

1-800-852-3345 ext 8128 or

1-800-603-271-8128

Find us on the web at: <http://www.dhhs.nh.gov/dphs/holu/>

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