

Healthy partnership

San Juan Basin Health collaborates with community to provide more than just doctor care

Although advances in public health are credited with adding 25 of the 30 years of life expectancy gained in the 20th century, public health still suffers from an identity crisis.

Everyone understands our “healthcare system” exists primarily to monitor health status and treat us if ill or injured; but what does a system whose sole purpose is prevention of disease and promotion of health do? And if public health is what we do together to assure that everyone can be healthy, what are the duties and responsibilities of your local health department?

Years ago, a committee of public health experts condensed core agency functions into 10 essential services. Examples of how they are provided locally follow:

🌀 **Monitor community health status:**

Comprehensive community assessments were done by our department and community summits, but we also continuously assess needs of specific population groups. Last year, we evaluated maternal child health issues and developed a long-term plan to address identified needs, with emphasis on immunizations and prevention.

🌀 **Determine and investigate problems and hazards:** Public health is extremely visible in situations such as pertussis outbreaks, but is less noticeable in investigation of burning prohibited materials, poor access to primary care, contamination of waterways and excess incidence of certain injuries or illnesses.

🌀 **Research:** Five years ago, while most health departments focused on meth lab cleanup, we facilitated the collaborative effort that developed an innovative approach to preventing meth use. This cutting-edge project has since expanded and meth use appears to be decreasing.

🌀 **Assure a competent public and personal health work force:** The strength and challenge of public health is the variety of backgrounds united under the common mission of improved community health. Fortunately, we have a qualified staff, continuing education opportunities, access to credible information through the Internet and, soon, an accredited state school of public health.

🌀 **Evaluate effectiveness of personal and population-based services:** Public health always is looking at services and systems to assure they are resulting in positive change and meeting the needs of all.

Examples include measuring decrease of tobacco use, evaluating the adequacy of the home-based support systems for the elderly, documenting changes attributable to nursing home visitation, assuring enrollment of children in public insurance and monitoring incidence of food and water borne illnesses.

🌀 **Link people to services and assure provision of care when otherwise unavailable:** When access to health care became dependent on having health insurance, exacerbated by poor provider reimbursement rates and the emphasis on shortened medical visits, public health became the safety net, going above and beyond the core services to meet the needs of the community. These services include family planning, prenatal care, the long-term care support system and immunizations.

🌀 **Enforce laws and regulations:**

Local public-health agencies are given broad powers to protect the health and safety of our residents. Most enforcement involves environmental protection, maintaining clean air and a safe food and water supply, but can include compliance with immunization laws and limiting behaviors that transmit communicable disease.

🌀 **Mobilize community partnerships:** It is the partnerships and collaborations within our community that lead to public health improvements far beyond what we, as an agency, could ever provide alone. Thanks to our healthcare providers, human service agencies, environmental groups, local governments, regional public-health partners, businesses, professional groups and more, our population has many opportunities to attain optimal health.

🌀 **Inform, educate and empower people:** If one essential service was the most essential, this would be it. In this complex world, no one can ever stay fully informed, so our role in educating the community – about how to prevent communicable disease, avoid unplanned pregnancy, maintain safe water wells and much more – is very important. We provide this service through printed materials, staff expertise and with help from our willing partners, the local media.

🌀 **Develop policies and plans that support health:**

The least visible, but nonetheless critical. This includes such efforts as decreasing tobacco sales to minors, advocating for physical education and nutritional foods in schools, passing local regulations to protect groundwater, and participating in the development of integrated health care.

Senate Bill 194, passed in 2008, will ensure these essential services are provided throughout Colorado. We are fortunate – we already have a health department that joins personal and environmental services under one roof, has a board of health composed of health-care professionals, an engineer, county commissioners and retired administrators, and has an experienced director appointed by the board.

SB 194 adds a state plan to delineate basic services.

Finally, local plans will allow us to go beyond the essential services and provide the services you, our community,

needs most and has come to expect.

Lynn Westberg is the director of San Juan Basin Health Department. Reach her at lynn@sjbhd.org.