

Innovation in Public Health: Blending the Tried and True with New Directions

Jennifer Kolker 23 September 2011

As Philadelphia welcomes the Pennsylvania Public Health Association's annual meeting to Philadelphia, we are fortunate to have so many from the public health community together to reflect on some of our collective accomplishments, explore the public health challenges that lie ahead, and strategize on how best to meet those challenges and improve the health of all Pennsylvanians.

Public health—ensuring the conditions under which people can be healthy—addresses “old” problems while facing new challenges every day. For decades we have been working to improve birth outcomes, ensure food safety, reduce communicable and chronic disease burden, and respond to disasters. But along with those old standards are new issues: the increasing and complicated role of health disparities in chronic disease, new strains of bacteria and pathogens that threaten our food supply, natural disasters that occur with more frequency and devastation and often impact those least able to bounce back. We have long worked against products harmful to our public's health, such as tobacco and guns; we are now challenged by new hazards from products such as toxic

substances that end up in the hands of children, and sugar-sweetened beverages, a known contributor to childhood obesity. As these public health challenges rapidly evolve and the communities we serve have more complex needs, so too does our need evolve for new partnerships and public health allies, and for the knowledge and skills to be successful in our mission.

Last year, the Drexel University School of Public Health—in collaboration with the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh-- received a federal grant to create the Pennsylvania Public Health Training Center (PAPHTC), with sites at both schools. PAPHTC's mission is to help build Pennsylvania's public health system by strengthening the technical, scientific, managerial and leadership competence of the public health workforce, by providing foundational, competency-based training opportunities.

Building upon the work that our Pittsburgh colleagues have done over the past decade, and looking squarely at the new public health challenges that lie ahead, this new initiative for Drexel gives us a unique opportunity to define who our public workforce is, and what public health skills and competencies are needed to be effective in the practice of public health. Our goal is to build on the existing public health expertise in the region and work with community partners to strengthen the public health workforce and build healthier communities—working collaboratively with health departments, community

groups and populations to directly impact real-world public health problems.

We have spent much of our first year building partnerships and assessing the training needs of our public health workforce, and have learned much in the process. We have learned that we need to expand our view of the public health workforce and expand the scope of training for that workforce in order to meet the public health challenges of today—and tomorrow.

At its most fundamental, the public health workforce in southeastern Pennsylvania comprises the hundreds of employees of our local health departments in Philadelphia, Bucks, Chester and Montgomery counties. These public servants make up the backbone of our public health system, performing the essential public health services that keep our communities safe and healthy. But the public health workforce reaches beyond government public health to the many nonprofit health organizations of varying sizes and functions that practice public health every day.

We have learned that we need to even further expand our definition of the public health workforce. We need to expand public health training into our clinical community, strengthening the ties between primary health care and public health, as well as to our clinical providers in emergency rooms and safety net clinics. We need to embrace teachers, leaders in the faith community, and

workers in public safety as partners in public health. We need to be open to thinking about all of those who have an influence on the public's health.

We have also heard the need to broaden the skill set of the public health workforce into new areas of expertise. Existing public health core competencies are many, and none can be sacrificed. But we need to learn more about the new food and environmental threats that we have seen in recent years, and be sure we have the skills to quickly respond. We need to learn more about the diverse faith communities in our region and how to engage them in dissemination of public health information in emergencies. We need to understand about risk communication for everything from disasters to autism. We need to learn about how best to use social networking to reach our youth with lifesaving prevention messages.

Finally, we know of the need to strengthen the ties between academic public health and public health practice. At Drexel, PAPTHC is housed within our Center for Public Health Practice, working to bring together the resources of the school with public health practitioners and to engage public health organizations and academia in partnership to improve the health of our communities. We hope to do more in bringing important public health science and research to public health practice and bringing public health practice experience to academic public health.

Public health is one of our oldest professions, and its day-to-day work relies on tried and true practices by a committed public health workforce. Innovation in public health requires continued reliance on what is tried and true, while recognizing the need to expand into new territories. With a broadly defined public health workforce and a rich set of public health skills and competencies, we can face our public health challenges and create healthier communities throughout the region and the Commonwealth.

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