

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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The 90's – It Takes a Village!

Coldwater, MI. The 90's were a time of transformation. The United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) dissolved, and new countries emerged. Apartheid ended in South Africa and a new unified government was voted in. New genres of music called "Grunge," "Alternative" and "Indie" replaced traditional rock and roll. And the World Wide Web was growing, pushing the information age upon us.

The "transforming" nature of the decade was not lost on public health. In 1988, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) issued an important report titled "The Future of Public Health," which shaped public health thinking for the 90's and thereafter. This report defined the core functions of public health and provided a framework for the services it delivered. Prior to this, public health had primarily been seen as a safety net for lower-income families and as a regulator or enforcer of sorts. But this report, clearly articulated what most public health practitioners already knew – it's all about community.

The leadership and administration of the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph District Health Department embraced the report and its concepts and worked hard with its partners to develop assessment capabilities; to engage the community; to identify priorities; and to develop strategies that would really improve the community's health – all of the community. Working in conjunction with its four local hospitals, the health department applied for and was awarded a rural health initiative grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. With funding in hand, it spearheaded an ambitious and comprehensive assessment/planning process which spanned the three-counties and included over 60 partners. The end result was real improvements in access to health care.

The transformation didn't end there. It was during the 90's that the department issued a series of community health profiles and applied for medically underserved and/or health professional shortage designation areas. It established the Diabetes Outreach Network, assumed responsibilities for the Area Agency on Aging, privatized some of its nursing services, revised its Environmental Code; and adopted its Civil Penalties regulations. It also initiated its car seat program and its tobacco reduction program. Known for being 'cutting edge', the department was selected as one of the pilot sites for the new Michigan Local Public Health Accreditation program and in 1999, the Department was awarded full accreditation.

With so much transformation occurring within the agency, including the completion of two new building projects in Three Rivers and Hillsdale, it only seemed appropriate that the department's name should be modified to incorporate this blossoming relationship with the community and newfound sense of purpose. In 1998, the health department became known as the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency.

Duke Anderson, CEO, Hillsdale Community Health Center and former health officer for the tri-county agency, recalls "Many people thought this was a time of great challenge, but I believed it was a time of great opportunity. We pushed hard to do the work that needed to be done. Sometimes that meant leading the way, other times it meant empowering our partners to take the lead. All the time, it meant thinking outside the box. We believed in what we were doing and knew that in the end it would mean a healthier community. Looking back, I can see that we were right."

After the rural health funding ended, the agency continued its partnerships through the multi-purpose collaborative bodies in each of the three counties. Through these networks, the health department works to coordinate and collaborate on various projects that are designed to improve the health of the community. The Public Health Dental Clinics in Hillsdale and St. Joseph Counties are two recent examples of fruit born from these relationships. The 278-Safe referral line through the Branch County Coalition Against Domestic Violence is another.

The lessons learned from the 90's were many. It taught us how to work together and dream together. And it taught us that more good can be accomplished when we

work together than when we work alone. In the end, it reminded us that it's all about people. After all, it takes a village to raise a child ... or to improve his/her health.

To learn more about your local health department and how we can better serve you, check out our website at www.bhsj.org.

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