

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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The New Millennium!

Coldwater, MI. The new millennium held much promise but also much uncertainty. Concerns of Y2K network crashes dampened the New Year's Party spirits of some. The 2000 Presidential election left voters hanging by a chad— as people waited through recounts to see who the next president would be. And the 2000's brought home something that many people in other parts of the world had known for quite a while, that terrorism is real and it's personal.

As if that wasn't enough, it was the decade of disasters. Hurricanes Ike, Irene, Katrina and Rita hit our shorelines, leaving in their wake unforeseen devastation. Hundreds of tornado touched downs splintered homes and families. And the ground literally trembled beneath as earthquakes and tsunamis devoured the landscape.

September 11, 2001 and the subsequent anthrax attack that followed, impacted the world on a global scale and public health in a global way. Armed with its disease surveillance capabilities, community mobilization experience and health planning expertise, it's become obvious to all that public health plays a vital role in protecting the public's health from potential bioterrorism attacks, emerging diseases threats and natural disasters.

This local health department, like most across the State of Michigan, has geared up for emerging threats by adding emergency preparedness staff and developing very detailed plans. Once developed, staff work to test and maintain the plans by conducting table top, functional and full-scale exercises to assure that the processes in place are workable and up to date. It's essential that in the event of a pandemic, biological, food borne or radiological event, everyone knows what to do.

Staff have been trained on how to distribute immunizations/medications to the masses, as well as on how to triage. They regularly test communication equipment and participate in call-down drills. And they are deployed to command centers or operation units when requested.

According to Jim Cook, Emergency Preparedness Coordinator, “Local public health is on the front line of a response to public health emergencies. It’s essential for the public’s health and safety that we work collaboratively and in-step with other first responders – law enforcement, fire and rescue personnel, medical services providers and hospitals – to coordinate service delivery during a crisis. This requires that we know going in what our individual roles will be, how we are going to communicate and how we are going to distribute information and assistance. Prior to an emergency, we want to have expected the unexpected, so that we can work both effectively and efficiently when the unexpected strikes.”

Early in the planning stages, the geographic challenges associated with working across a three county jurisdiction in the event of a mass casualty event were identified. To address these issues, the Agency has expanded its use of technology. In 2006, it joined the Southwest Michigan Tele-health Video Conferencing Network as a way to assure that each office has teleconferencing capabilities that can connect to each other, its partners and to the state offices. It has also carefully considered how to build in redundancy and other safeguards into its computer systems, to help assure adequate backups.

Improving disease surveillance by having systems that allow for real-time disease tracking is also of prime importance. To this end, the health department has installed an internet-based disease reporting software package that allows physicians, labs and schools to do their reporting online, thus streamlining the whole process and improving their data-reporting’s timeliness and accuracy.

The Agency also has spent much time in updating its internet website – making it more user friendly and more information intense. The front page is updated almost on a weekly basis with current information about relevant local health issues of prime public health importance. The site also contains FAQ sheets on hundreds of health topics like measles, chickenpox, scabies, head lice, lyme disease, etc. These materials provide

basic information about signs and symptoms, treatment and prevention measures. The site lists programs and clinics, including their schedules, locations, contact information and eligibility requirements so that the user can quickly decide if a particular service meets their need.

Has it been worth it? Yes! In 2009, during the H1N1 Pandemic, Agency staff were able to vaccinate 32,259 high risk individuals. To its credit, the Agency reported the highest immunization rate for H1N1 flu among school-age children when compared to the state's other 44 local public health jurisdictions. Results matter – and our results were great!

In the end, it's overcoming challenges that breeds hope – and public health is working to meet each challenge it encounters head on.

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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