

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

1970's – Can You Dig It?

Coldwater, MI. The 70s were known as the beginning of the digital revolution. It was a time of the OPEC Oil Crisis and Watergate.... of disco balls, John Travolta and Saturday Night Fever. It was the time of lava lamps, waterbeds and the progressive rock sounds of Genesis, Yes and Pink Floyd.

In the world of public health, the 70's was a time of social change. It was during this decade that birth control pills became available to all women and the government began funding family planning under Title X. This was also the time when the WIC program was developed. It was during this decade that Michigan experienced its PBB (Polybrominated biphenyls) crisis; feared a Swine Flu pandemic; and touted its newly passed public health code (P.A. 368 of 1978).

It was in 1972, amid all the social change, that Branch, Hillsdale and St. Joseph Counties 'united in health' to form the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph District Health Department, a new entity that shared governance, funding and resources and strived to establish coordinated programs and services.

During the formative years of the health department, facility development was a priority. New offices in St. Joseph County were established in Centreville at the Fairview Medical Care facility. The site was renovated and an open house held (1974). Groundbreaking for new Branch and Hillsdale County facilities also took place that same year which served to establish human service complexes in each county.

Public health was growing in both size and scope. In response to a growing infant mortality problem, the health department initiated its family planning program and WIC (Women, Infant and Children) program. By increasing access to birth control and providing supplemental food and nutrition education to low- income pregnant women

and their children, the health department made inroads by first combating teen pregnancy and nutritional deficiencies, both known risks factors for infant deaths. They also implemented a vaccination program for the Swine flu; and passed the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph District Health Department's Uniform Environmental Health Code, which standardized regulations across the jurisdiction to protect the quality of the environment as it affects human health, and to prevent the occurrence of public health nuisances.

Noel Wiley, retired Health Officer, and the District Health Department's first Environmental Health Director, recalls some of the environmental health issues which needed to be addressed during this time period. "Looking back, the first years were difficult because each county had separate policies and procedures and that was unwieldy at times. In fact, in Hillsdale County, there was no legal basis for handling many of the environmental health problems related to rental properties or other concerns that the citizens brought to our attention. There was no legal basis to prevent them either." Noel went on "When we proposed the uniform code, some Commissioners expressed concerns about property owner rights and were reluctant to put forth regulations that would impinge on those rights. Unfortunately, it took a tragic house fire and the death of six children for commissioners to understand the need for a uniform environmental code that established standards across the district that would protect the rights of landowners as well as those of their neighbors." The first Uniform Environmental Code went into effect on September 1, 1975.

PBB poisoning, a feared carcinogen, was another problem that occurred in Michigan and had implications for the tri-county area. In 1973, over 500 pounds of PBB, a flame retardant, was accidentally mixed into some animal feed. Within months, cattle started dying and farmers needed assistance to determine what was happening and what to do with the dying animals. When the Michigan Department of Agriculture began considering eastern Hillsdale County as a possible disposal site because of its heavy clay soil, the health department organized town hall meetings within the community so that an open discussion could occur. As a result, Hillsdale was not selected as a disposal site.

While interest in the PBB contamination has since waned, the District Health Department persists in seeking solutions to issues of infant mortality, disease prevention and a healthy environment. Today, the health department continues to provide the WIC program to eligible pregnant and postpartum/breastfeeding women and their children up to age 5, as well as provide immunizations that prevent flu and other diseases. It also works to enforce the uniform environmental code which was revised in 1990, investigating nuisance complaints, reviewing water and septic systems and conducting over 900 restaurant inspections each year.

And though some of the challenges have changed, our commitment to our community remains the same – to continually strive to provide quality and accessible public health services in the most fiscally responsible manner possible.

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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