

Strengthening the Public Health Infrastructure

Summary of Position Paper Approved by the ACP Board of Regents, April 2012

What Is the Existing Public Health Infrastructure?

Public health – the practice of preventing diseases and promoting good health within groups of people – concentrates on the health of the population rather than care of the individual patient, and works to protect and improve the health of communities through education, policy development, promotion of healthy lifestyles, and research. Public health depends on an underlying foundation or infrastructure that supports the planning, delivery, and evaluation of public health activities and practices.

Public health infrastructure includes three key components that enable a public health organization at any level to deliver public health services. These components are a capable and qualified workforce, up-to-date data and information systems, and public health agencies capable of assessing and responding to public health needs. The building blocks for the public health infrastructure include various departments in the federal government as well as the network of nearly 3,000 local public health agencies and county and city health departments.

Why Is There a Need to Strengthen the Public Health Infrastructure?

A strong public health infrastructure provides the capacity to prepare for and respond to both acute (emergency) and chronic (ongoing) threats to the nation's health. It is imperative that we as a nation invest and maintain a strong public health infrastructure in order to ensure that appropriate health care services are able to meet the population's health care needs. Ensuring that agencies have the necessary infrastructure to provide essential public health services is also part of the 2020 Healthy People Objectives – science-based, 10-year national objectives for improving the health of all Americans.

Key Findings and Recommendations from the Paper

ACP recommends the following:

- Adequate funding to the agencies forming the backbone of the public health infrastructure will help ensure that the health care system is capable of assessing and responding to public health needs. In addition to adequate funding, federal agencies should collaborate and work together to improve efficiency, reduce duplicative efforts and strengthen the public health infrastructure.
- In the current economic environment, priority funding should go to programs shown to be effective in promoting critical public health objectives, including:
 - Supporting safety net facilities and local health departments
 - Reducing health care disparities
 - Encouraging healthy habits, including healthful diets and reduction in tobacco use
 - Reducing illnesses relating to environmental pollution, global climate change, and other environmental risks

- Educating clinicians and the public on disaster preparedness, to ensure sufficient “first responder” capacity and training
- Reducing the incidence of food-borne illnesses
- Providing prevention and treatment of illnesses relating to alcohol, drug, and other substances abusers
- Providing quality care and protection for mentally ill inmates within the prison system
- Preventing injuries and deaths resulting from all types of violence
- Having a health care workforce that is appropriately educated and trained in public health related competencies is essential to meet the nation’s health care needs.
- The public health workforce should educate the public on new health care delivery models and the importance of primary care.
- To address current and looming pharmaceutical therapies and vaccine shortages, the federal government should work with pharmaceutical companies to ensure that there is an adequate supply of pharmaceutical therapies and vaccines to protect and treat the U.S. population.
- Programs to inform the public of the benefit of vaccinations for children, adolescents, and adults, to counter misinformation about the risks of vaccinations, and to encourage increased vaccination rates, particularly for vulnerable populations, are especially important for the health of the population.
- ACP encourages the development and implementation of a comprehensive, nation-wide public health informatics infrastructure, sharable by all public health stakeholders. This will require significant investments in new and improved technologies, standards, methodologies, human resources, and education. The result should be a fundamental transformation in the roles and effectiveness of our public health resources.

For More Information

This issue brief is a summary of *Strengthening the Public Health Infrastructure*. The full paper is available at http://www.acponline.org/advocacy/where_we_stand/policy/public_health.pdf.