An Orientation to the Public Health System for Participants and Spectators

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What is Public Health? : An Orientation to the Public Health System for Participants and Spectators

The field of public health includes a variety of responsibilities and professional disciplines. Most public health disciplines fulfill programmatic responsibilities by focusing on a specific set of issues like immunizations, food safety, communicable disease investigation or any number of other programs. At the same time, these people pursue the larger goal of preserving, promoting, and protecting the public's health. Over the last several years, the landscape has changed dramatically for staff at all levels of public health agencies. As the world has gotten smaller, the threats of disease and terrorism have greatly increased. Public health professionals serving the public find it increasingly difficult to understand where they fit in the daily accomplishments and needs of their agencies. Similarly, boards of health members, elected officials, fellow healthcare professionals and others in the community find it difficult to understand what public health does. They need to learn how public health fits into the framework of meeting the needs of today's challenges.

All parties should have a thorough understanding of both the capabilities and limitations of public health systems. These capabilities and limitations are dictated by many factors that include; size funding, other community resources, political climate, geographic location, staff competencies, and strength of leadership. Public health faces the challenge of operating in relative obscurity. Staff in the public health arena needs to actively pursue methods of communicating which help overcome challenges.

There are three Core Functions of Public Health recognized by people in the field. These functions include Assessment, Policy Development, and Assurance. Though there are various sets of core functions one might choose, the trio mentioned above is certainly among the most defensible. (Rowitz, 2001) These functions have been further defined by ten essential services, which categorize the ongoing activities of public health professionals. We intend to provide a clear description of the three core functions and ten essential services.

This orientation packet is intended to provide brief, understandable information to help orient a wide range of people to the core functions and essential services provided by all public health agencies. Whether you are an employee of a public health agency, an elected official, a community leader, or a member of the general public, this packet is intended to help you better understand the mission, responsibilities, services, and opportunities provided by public health. Hopefully, this packet will provide a resource that will help you interact with the public health system with a greater understanding of the **Core Functions** and **Essential Services**.

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Section I - Core Function: Assessment

Assessment involves all the activities related to community diagnosis. These activities include surveillance, identification of needs, analysis of the causes of problems, collection and interpretation of data, case-finding, monitoring and forecasting trends, research and the evaluation of outcomes.

This Core Function addresses Essential Services 1 and 2 listed below:

1) Monitor health status to identify community health problems

- Population-based community health profiles
- Access to and utilization of current technology to manage, display, analyze and communicate population health data
- Maintenance of population health registries

2) Diagnose and investigate health problems and health hazards in the community

- Identification and surveillance of health threats
- Plan for public health emergencies
- Investigation and responds to public health emergencies
- Laboratory support for investigation of health threats

Professionals who generally have responsibilities in at least one of these service areas include:

- Nurse (2)
- Epidemiologist (1 & 2)
- Health Data Analyst (1 & 2)
- Health Statistician (1 & 2)
- Laboratory Technician (2)
- Environmental Health Inspector (2)
- Food Program Coordinator (2)
- Food Sanitarian (2)
- Infectious / Communicable Disease Coordinator (1 & 2)
- Medical Advisor (1 & 2)
- Emergency Response Coordinator (2)
- Bio-terrorism Coordinator (1 & 2)
- Agency liaison to IDPH, CDC, DHHS, EPA, USDA (1 & 2)
- Public Health Information Officer (1)

Questions to help someone determine how they support the public health system's efforts in this area or what the public health system asks itself when it provides service in this area:

Do I provide data and analysis that helps communities answer these two key questions: *"How healthy are our residents?" and "What does the health status of our community looks like?"*

Do I compile and update community health profile using community health assessment data?

Do I use new technologies to collect, manage, integrate, and display health profile data?

Do I use information from one or more population health registries?

Do I collect reportable disease information from community health providers on possible disease outbreaks?

Do I have a skill set that allows me to assess, investigate and analyze health threats and hazards?

Do I perform functions that have a role in the development and testing of the plan that defines the organization's responsibilities, establish communication and information networks, and clearly outlines alert and evacuation protocols in the event of a public health emergency?

Do I perform functions that have a role in maintaining access to laboratory facilities capable of investigating public health problems, hazards and emergencies; and meeting routine diagnostic and surveillance needs?

Essential Service # 1: Monitor health status to identify community health problems

This service includes accurate diagnosis of the community's health status; identification of threats to health and assessment of health service needs; timely collection, analysis, and publication of information on access, utilization, costs, and outcomes of personal health services; attention to the vital statistics and health status of specific-groups that are at higher risk than the total population; and collaboration to manage integrated information systems with private providers and health benefit plans.

The following provides a sample of the activities performed under this service that impact the public's health:

- Develops and maintains population-based programs that collect health related data to measure health status
- Tracks health-related data and compares them to national health objectives and other benchmarks.
- Compiles and analyzes data for local, state and national health surveillance efforts.
- Offers training in the interpretation and use of health-related data to all levels of the public health system (federal, state and local).
- Allocates resources for monitoring health status and identifying health problems to areas of highest need and plans for the development of new resources.

Professionals who provide these services:

- Epidemiologist
- Health Data Analyst
- Health Statistician
- Health Planner
- Public Health Information Officer

Questions to ask yourself to help determine if you perform functions that contribute to Essential Service #1:

- Do I conduct regular community health assessments to monitor progress towards health related objectives?
- Do I promote community-wide use of community health profile and/or assessment data to assure that this information can be easily accessed and used by the community?
- Do I maintain and contribute to population health registries using established criteria to report identified health events?

Essential Service #2: Diagnose and investigate health problems and health hazards in the community

This service includes the epidemiologic identification of emerging health threats; public health laboratory capability using modern technology to conduct rapid screening and high volume testing; active infectious disease epidemiology programs; and technical capacity for epidemiologic investigation of disease outbreaks and patterns of chronic disease and injury.

The following provides a sample of the activities performed under this service that impact the public's health:

- Operates surveillance systems that integrate all levels of the public health system to identify and analyze threats to the public health.
- Operates a reporting system for receiving and transmitting information regarding reportable diseases and other potential public health threats.
- Assists in epidemiologic analysis at all levels of the public health system.
- Drafts, monitors and reviews periodically the public health threat investigation and response plans.

Professionals who provide these services:

- Epidemiologist
- Infectious / Communicable Disease Coordinator
- Emergency Response Coordinator
- Bio-terrorism Coordinator

Questions to ask yourself to help determine if you perform functions that contribute to Essential Service #2:

- Do I use new technologies and communication systems to support surveillance and investigation activities?
- Do I perform functions that allow me to implement procedures that alert the community of possible health threats and hazards?
- Do I perform functions that have a role in the development of written epidemiologic case investigation protocols for immediate investigation of communicable disease outbreaks, environmental health hazards, chemical and biological agent threats, radiological threats, and large scale disasters?
- Do I perform functions that have a role in maintaining guidelines or protocols to address the handling of lab samples that define procedures for storing, collecting, labeling, transporting, and delivering lab samples and for determining the chain of custody regarding the handling of samples?

Section II - Core Function: Policy Development

Policy Development is a complex process that results from the interaction and consensus development of a wide range of public and private organizations and individuals. It is through policy that society makes decisions about problems, chooses goals and the proper means to reach them, handles conflicting points of view about ways to address problems and finally, how resources should be handled. Government provides guidance in this process.

This Core Function addresses Essential Services 3, 4, and 5 listed below:

3) Inform, educate, and empower people about health issues
–Social marketing and targeted media public communication
–Providing accessible health information resources at community levels
–Joint health education programs with schools, churches, and worksites

4) Mobilize community partnerships and action to identify and solve health problems
–Convening and facilitating community groups in undertaking defined preventive, screening, rehabilitation, and support programs
–Skilled coalition building ability

5) Develop policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts
–Systematic community level and state level planning for health improvement
–Tracking of measurable health objectives as a part of continuous quality improvement strategies
–Development of codes, regulations and legislation to guide the practice of public health

Professionals who generally have responsibilities in at least one of these service areas include:

- Nurses (3)
- Health educators (3 & 4)
- Communications manager (to the public through the media and direct distribution of information) (3 & 4)
- Substance abuse prevention specialists (3)
- Public Health Assistants (more than a clerk, but not as involved as a nursing assistant) (3)
- "Liaisons" working in schools, with other government agencies in a collaborative, and those working with other community social service providers (3 & 4)
- Clerical staff providing information through an intake interview and screening process (3)
- Public Health Administrator (3, 4, & 5)

Board of Health – As a part of the local public health system; they are key contributors to the agency's strategic plan and in carrying that message to the community

Questions to help someone determine how they support the public health system's efforts in this area or what the public health system ask itself when it provides service in this area:

Do I provide information in any form to individuals, groups, or the community at large in the course of my normal work activities? This might include mailing out literature, directing people to programs or other resources to assist them with their issue or concern, conducting counseling or informational sessions,

Do I interact with groups who form policies, implement legal requirements, or influence funding?

Do I work as part of the public health system's efforts to encourage and develop partnerships in the community that seek to address a public health need?

Essential Service # 3: Inform, educate, and empower people about health issues

This service involves social marketing and targeted media public communication; providing accessible health information resources at community levels; active collaboration with personal health care providers to reinforce health promotion messages and programs; and joint health education programs with schools, churches, and worksites.

The following provides a sample of the activities performed under this service that impact the public's health:

- Provides health promotion and education programs
- Communicates via all aspects of media
- Conducts social marketing campaigns
- Provides accessible health information on health risks, health status and health needs
- Identifies and provides resources to facilitate healthy living
- Sponsors educational programs to develop knowledge, skills, and behavior to improve individual and community health
- Develops collaborative networks for health promotion
- Evaluates appropriateness, quality, and effectiveness of public health education

Professionals who provide these services:

- Public Health Nurses
- Health Educators
- Community Relations Director
- Environmental Director/Inspectors
- Social Workers

Questions to ask yourself to help determine if you perform functions that contribute to Essential Service #3:

- Do I provide information in any form to individuals, groups, or the community at large in the course of my normal work activities?
- Do I work with a collaborative network to provide health promotion activities?
- Do I assist in the training, evaluation, credentialing, or monitoring of staff performance and quality of work outcomes?
- Do I work in a program which helps enforce the local laws and regulations to protect the public's health and ensure safety?

Essential Service # 4: Mobilize community partnerships to identify and solve health problems

This service involves convening and facilitating community groups and associations, including those not typically considered to be health-related, in undertaking defined preventive, screening, rehabilitation, and support programs; and skilled coalition-building ability in order to draw upon the full range of potential human and material resources in the cause of community health.

The following provides a sample of the activities performed under this service that impact the public's health:

- Identifies potential stakeholders who contribute to or benefit from public health, and increase their awareness of the value of public health
- Builds coalitions to draw upon the full range of potential human and material resources to improve community health
- Convenes and facilitates partnerships among groups and associations which include those typically not health related in understanding defined health improvement projects, including preventative, screening, rehabilitation, and support programs
- Establishes and maintains a comprehensive directory of community organizations
- Directs and evaluates resolution to health problems

Professionals who provide these services:

- Health Educators
- Community Relations Director
- All Our Kids (A-OK) Network Coordinators
- Program Specific Coordinators/Supervisors, i.e. identified teen pregnancy problem will have the Family Planning Coordinator at the table
- Public Health Nurses
- Board of Health Members
- Administrator and/or designated administrative staff

Questions to ask yourself to help determine if you perform functions that contribute to Essential Service # 4:

- Do I work with the Illinois Project for Local Assessment of Needs (IPLAN)?
- Do I design and/or deliver communication to the community relating to Public Health's role in a particular incidence, i.e. Bioterrorism?
- Does my job description hold me responsible for community networking and collaboration?

Essential Service #5: Develop policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts

This service requires leadership development at all levels of public health; systematic community-level and state-level planning for health improvement in all jurisdictions; development and tracking of measurable health objectives as a part of continuous quality improvement strategies; joint evaluation with the medical health care system to define consistent policy regarding prevention and treatment services; and development of codes, regulations and legislation to guide the practice of public health.

The following provides a sample of the activities performed under this service that impact the public's health:

- Deliver essential public health services to the entire community
- Establish and maintain effective community partnerships and appropriate working relationships with governing entities
- Establish and implement a strategic community health improvement plan and assess and evaluate it on an ongoing basis
- Educate the community about health goals and objectives that have been established
- Coordinate services with the state public health system and community health care partners

Professional who provide these services:

- Agency Administrator
- Local Board of Health members
- Director of Nursing/Community Services and Medical Director
- All program Coordinators/Supervisors
- Epidemiologist
- Public Health Nurses
- Public Health Educator
- Community Relations Director
- Quality Improvement and Safety Committee members

Questions to ask yourself to help determine if you perform functions that contribute to Essential Service #5:

- Do I develop and/or implement policies and plans that will improve the health of the community?
- Do I interact with and promote positive working relationships with area community health care providers?
- Do I establish or participate in community partnerships?

- Do I establish and track measurable health objectives as a part of the continuous quality improvement process?

Section III - Core Function: Assurance

Assurance is related to the implementation of legislative mandates and the maintenance of statutory responsibility. It is critical that mechanisms are in place to guarantee that necessary services are provided to meet agreed upon goals. Assurance include regulation of services and products provided both in the public and private sectors, accountability to people setting health objectives and providing reports on progress, and developing adequate responses to health crisis. The assurance function requires the exercise of authority. It also provides the guarantees for certain health services.

This Core Function addresses Essential Services 6, 7, 8, and 9 listed below:

6) **Enforce laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety**
   - Full enforcement of sanitary codes and clean air standards
   - Full protection of drinking water supplies
   - Timely follow-up of hazards, preventable injuries, and exposure-related diseases
   - Monitoring of quality medical services
7) **Link people to needed personal health services and assure the provision of health care when otherwise unavailable**
   - Assuring effective entry for disadvantaged people into a coordinated system of care
   - Culturally and linguistically appropriate materials, ongoing care management, transportation services
   - Technical assistance for effective worksite health promotion/disease prevention programs
8) **Assure a competent public and personal health care workforce**
   - Continuing education and training for personnel
   - Efficient processes for licensure of professionals and certification of facilities
   - Adoption of continuous quality improvement and life-long learning
9) **Evaluate effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services**
   - Ongoing evaluation of health programs, based on analysis of health status and service utilization data

Professionals who generally have responsibilities in at least one of these service areas include:

Environmental Health Inspectors (6)
Animal Control Wardens/Officers (6)
Rabies Registration staff (6)
Epidemiologists (9)
Risk Managers (9)
Continuous Quality Improvement Coordinators (9)
Nurses (7)
Paraprofessional program support staff (7)

Case Managers (7)
Translators (7)
Programmatic intake/clerical staff (7)
Human resource staff (8)
All managers and supervisors (8)

Questions to help someone determine how they support the public health system's efforts in this area or what the public health system asks itself when it provides service in this area:

Do I work in a program which helps enforce the local laws and regulations to protect the public's health and ensure safety?

Do I actively participate in the process that works to ensure individuals or groups gain access to the public health resources provided by my agency or elsewhere in the community?

Do I assist in the training, evaluation, credentialing, or monitoring of staff performance and quality of work outcomes?

Essential Service #6: Enforce laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety

This service involves full enforcement of sanitary codes, especially in the food industry; full protection of drinking water supplies; enforcement of clean air standards; timely follow-up of hazards, preventable injuries, and exposure-related diseases identified in occupational and community settings; monitoring quality of medical services (e.g. laboratory, nursing homes, and home health care); and timely review of new drug, biologic, and medical device applications.

The following provides a sample of the activities performed under this service that impact the public's health:

- Establishes a solid working knowledge of federal, state, and local laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety and assure they are enforced
- Assists with modifying existing laws, or formulating new ones
- Educates health care staff and the community on public health laws they are required to comply with, and the meaning and purpose of them
- Evaluates the compliance of regulated organizations and entities and assure enforcement activities are performed by the proper authorities

Professionals who provide these services:

- Agency Administrator
- Local Board of Health members
- Director of Nursing/Community Services
- Coordinator of Community Relations/Director of Public Relations
- Health Educator
- Environmental, Communicable Disease, Immunization, Home Health, and MCH program staff (including coordinators/supervisors, nurses, nurse assistants, sanitarians)
- Public Health Information Officer

Questions to ask yourself to help determine if you perform functions that contribute to Essential Service #6:

- Do I assess and enforce laws to assure regulated entities are in compliance with public health laws/regulations?
- Do I identify health issues that are not adequately addressed?
- Do I participate in modifying existing or formulating new laws to improve the public's health?
- Do I educate the community?
- Do I assure the community's environment is clean, safe, and its members have access to quality medical services?

Essential Service #7: Link people to needed personal health services and assure the provision of health care when otherwise unavailable

This service (often referred to as "outreach" or "enabling" services) includes assuring effective entry for socially disadvantaged people into a coordinated system of clinical care; culturally and linguistically appropriate materials and staff to assure linkage to services for special population groups; ongoing "care management"; transportation services; targeted health information to high risk population groups; and technical assistance for effective worksite health promotion/disease prevention programs.

The following provides a sample of the activities performed under this service that impact the public's health:

- Performs self-assessment and develops plans to identify and address priority health needs
- Ensures funding is available to provide access to and services for identified priority health risk communities
- Provides targeted outreach and education for special populations
- Develops continuous care management systems

Professionals who provide these services:

- Public Health Administrator
- Public Health Educator
- Nurse (inclusive but not limited to Supervising Nurse, Staff Nurse, Registered Nurse, Nurse Practitioner, Case Manager, Licensed Practical Nurse)
- Home Health Aide
- Social Worker
- Epidemiologist
- Financial Manager
- Board of Health
- Environmental Engineer

Questions to ask yourself to help determine if you perform functions that contribute to Essential Service #7:

- Do I provide information or service to individuals or communities in the course of my day to assure conditions in which people can be healthy?
- Do I actively participate in activities that organize communities aimed at the prevention of disease and promotion of health?
- Do I monitor health status to identify at-risk communities or health disparity?

Essential Service #8: Assure a competent public and personal health care workforce

This service includes education and training for personnel to meet the needs for public and personal health service; efficient processes for licensure of professionals and certification of facilities with regular verification and inspection follow-up; adoption of continuous quality improvement and life-long learning within all licensure and certification programs; active partnerships with professional training programs to assure community-relevant learning experiences for all students; and continuing education in management and leadership development programs for those charged with administrative/executive roles.

The following provides a sample of the activities performed under this service that impact the public's health:

- Tracks of continuing education for management and leadership development to guide the competency of a trained workforce
- Assures that priority health needs are being addressed through education, training and assessment of license and/or professional personnel
- Provides lifelong learning programs and partnerships with professional training programs

Professionals who provide these services:

- Public Health Administrator
- Public Health Educator
- Public Health Trainer
- Public Health Associations (IPHA, APHA)
- Public Health Credentialing Associations
- Schools of Public Health
- Board of Health

Questions to ask yourself to help determine if you perform functions that contribute to Essential Service #8:

- Do I assist in educating, training, licensing, monitoring or evaluating public and personal health care workers to guarantee skills necessary to fulfill daily responsibilities of meeting health needs?
- Do I help staff develop goals and evaluate responsibilities?

Essential Service #9: Evaluate effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services.

This service calls for ongoing evaluation of health programs, based on analysis of health status and service utilization data, to assess program effectiveness and to provide information necessary for allocating resources and reshaping programs.

Once a health service has been instituted, an evaluation strategy must be in place to track performance related to outcome objectives. This evaluation strategy should address issues of effectiveness of process, as well as quality of personal and population-based programs. (Kouzes and Posner, 2002)

The following provides a sample of the activities performed under this service that impact the public's health:

- Demonstrate analytic abilities directed to program planning and function.
- Establish procedures to analyze systems for funding local health services
- Evaluate quality improvement initiatives
- Develop a process to ensure appropriate communication between individuals and departments
- Analyze health agency ability to obtain credentialing and accreditation
- Determination of the commitment and enthusiasm of members of the health team.

Professionals who provide these services:

- Chief Operating Officer/Executive Director/Public Health Administrator
- Director of health services
- Senior level managers
- Human resource directors
- Health planners
- Director of budget/Financial officers
- Epidemiologists
- Environmental health director

Questions to ask yourself to help determine if you perform functions that contribute to Essential Service #9:

- Do I understand the importance of evaluating the quality of health services provided by my agency?
- Do I conduct regular community health assessments to monitor progress towards health related objectives?
- Do I analyze data obtained from community health evaluations?
- Do I disseminate evaluation data to appropriate parties?
- Do I meet regularly with departments to evaluate progress of quality delivery of health care?

- Do I keep current on data related to accessibility and quality of health services?
- Do I understand the relationship of Federal, State and Local health services related to access to health services?

Section IV - Essential Service #10: Research for new insights and innovative solutions to health problems

This service includes continuous linkage with appropriate institutions of higher learning and research and an internal capacity to mount timely epidemiologic and economic analyses and conduct needed health services research.

"Leaders need information for making decisions. Ongoing program evaluation creates an atmosphere in which effective leadership and organizational learning can flourish." Research should help to identify broad forces affecting the community health system, such as epidemiology, technology and legislation. "The actual process of identifying health problems of importance to the community is one that must titrate information derived from data sets with information derived from the community's perceptions of problems which are most important. (Turnock, 2001)

The following provides a sample of the activities performed under this service that impact the public's health:

- Identify problems for which research may be needed
- Evaluate the usefulness of research on identified health problems
- Assess the priority of the health problem
- Check current knowledge on targeted health problems
- Identify tentative research questions
- Identify potential research partners and collaborate in designing research
- Carry out research
- Use and disseminate research findings

Professionals who provide these services:

- Agency administrator
- Research staff members
- Funding/grant-writing staff
- Program coordinators/supervisors
- Epidemiologist
- Public health nurses
- Quality improvement and Safety Committee members

Questions to ask yourself to help determine if you perform functions that contribute to Essential Service #10:

- Do I identify problems to be researched?
- Do I describe technical assistance needed for research?
- Do I specify the resources needed for research?

- Do I prioritize the importance of research problems?
- Do I gather information using reliable methods of study?
- Do I confer with team members to analyze data?
- Do I disseminate research findings to appropriate individuals?

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Conclusion

The goal of this orientation packet is to educate the public and public health professionals on the three Core Functions and ten Essential Services of public health. This orientation packet is a useful tool that will assist in providing a basic working knowledge of the mission of public health and how we as public health professionals work to fulfill that mission in the daily performance of our duties and responsibilites.

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