

STORY FROM THE FIELD

Lorain City Health Department – Lorain, OH

Population Served: 90,500

When the H1N1 virus hit the United States in early 2009, Lorain County, Ohio was home to one of the first confirmed cases of the virus. Local health departments immediately sprang into action by pooling their resources, mobilizing volunteer networks, activating the Emergency Operation Center, and implementing the National Incident Management System.

However, in this aging former steel and auto town, the ability of the health department to prevent and respond to public health emergencies has been hobbled by budget shortfalls. The health department took a hit in local funding – down 54 percent in 2009 – as well as state funding, which has dropped 30 percent per capita over two years.

“All of our staff have been put on a four-day work week,” said health commissioner Terrence Tomaszewski. “In a few weeks, we will have to shut down some programs entirely. We have no money whatsoever to purchase flu vaccine and no staff to give the vaccinations.”

For Lorain City Health Department, this lack of funds means an end to many programs, including mobile clinics that provided influenza vaccinations in low income high rises. It affects the health department’s ability provide the H1N1 vaccine this fall. Frank Davoli, a retired auto worker who has volunteered for the health department’s immunization days for 12 years, is worried for the seniors citizens and disabled people who do not have the mobility or insurance to access other services.

“A lot of these people won’t get the vaccine,” said Davoli. “If the flu hits, they’ll flood the emergency room – that’s a way to spread disease. This year, more than any other time, the health department needs help.”

Mobile clinics not only provided an important service to vulnerable populations, but they also provided a training opportunity for staff to practice rapid response to emergency situations and connect with the community.

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NACCHO

National Association of County & City Health Officials

The National Connection for Local Public Health



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“I think what’s going to happen is that, as we don’t practice, we will be less prepared,” Tomaszewski said.

While Tomaszewski remains concerned about the flu season ahead, he argues for a broader understanding of the value of public health investment.

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“There are so many public health issues that only those that get the media attention are being addressed,” he says. “The basic core public health functions are totally overlooked. If we funded infrastructure, we would already be out in the community and the schools. Our traditional public health system would take care of problems – like childhood obesity – before they started, instead of throwing money at the new issue of the day.”

Davoli echoes this argument for public health.

“When you support a local health department, costs in the long run are a lot less. We will use every cent you give us to help residents in our area.”

NACCHO is the national organization representing local health departments. NACCHO supports efforts that protect and improve the health of all people and all communities by promoting national policy, developing resources and programs, seeking health equity, and supporting effective local public health practice and systems.

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