NACCHO
National Association of County & City Health Officials
The National Connection for Local Public Health

Local Health Department Response to the Multistate Fungal Meningitis Outbreak

The National Association of County and City Health Departments (NACCHO) is the best and most reliable source of information about the nation's approximately 2,800 local health departments who run programs and services that make it easier for people to be healthy and ensure that people are safe from public health emergencies.

Local health departments are on the front lines of public health. You may not always see the work that they do, but you are safer and healthier because of it.

Local health departments protect children and adults from infectious diseases through detecting and stopping outbreaks of diseases like West Nile virus, tuberculosis, and food-borne illnesses.

Local health departments are actively responding to the multistate fungal meningitis outbreak[1] even if no cases have been reported in their state to-date.

Local health departments have had success in tracking and investigating the outbreak, responding to the outbreak, addressing the concerns of their communities, and ensuring that healthcare facilities, pharmacies, and providers are not using New England Compounding Center (NECC) products due to good communication and coordination with the state health departments, healthcare facilities, and local health departments in neighboring jurisdictions.

Local health departments are involved in the following ways:

- **Contacting healthcare facilities that received products from NECC to ensure that facilities stop using these products**
    - Local health departments relay health alerts, CDC guidance, and updates to these facilities.
    - They help facilities to determine how many people are affected and develop messages for contacting and screening people.
    - Local health departments coordinate strategies with facilities, neighboring jurisdictions, and state health departments to locate and notify people who received contaminated product.
    - Some local health departments work with facilities to actively monitor and continue following up with people until they are no longer at risk for developing an infection.

- **Notifying patients who received contaminated product**
    - Some local health departments help healthcare facilities contact all people who received contaminated product to ensure they are aware of their potential exposure and know what do to if they develop symptoms.
    - Public health nurses make home visits to notify people they could not reach by phone.
    - Local health departments also work with local hospitals to identify additional people who may be connected to the outbreak.

- **Communicating with medical providers and local hospitals**
    - Medical providers and local hospitals ensure people receive medical care based on CDC guidance. As such, local health departments keep close contact with these groups to ensure they are aware of the latest CDC guidance (which rapidly change as the situation evolves) and of people who may seek diagnostic testing, treatment, and follow-up.

- **Responding to concerns and questions from the community and local media**
    - Local health departments respond to numerous calls from healthcare providers, the public, and local media with questions and concerns about the outbreak.
    - Local health departments broadly disseminate information to the community through websites, newsletters, and other communication channels.

Local health departments face several c**hallenges** such as:

- Receiving timely and detailed information and updates that enable them to respond effectively.

- Locating, notifying, and assisting people who receive healthcare in one jurisdiction but live in another.

- Managing the substantial time needed to: (1) identify, notify, counsel, and track affected people; (2) communicate and coordinate information exchange with the state health department, healthcare facilities, and medical providers; (3) remain informed and stay up-to-date on the evolving situation and guidance; (4) convey complex and rapidly-changing information in a clear and timely manner; and (5) address the concerns and questions from the community and local media.

- Lacking staff to respond to this outbreak while simultaneously perform the routine ongoing functions that keep the community healthy and safe. A NACCHO report[2] on local health department job losses and program cuts contains the following findings on programs critical to outbreak response:
    - **Twenty-four percent** of local health departments that had an **emergency preparedness program** in 2011 reduced or eliminated it that year.
    - **Nineteen percent** of local health departments that had an **immunization program** in 2011 reduced or eliminated it that year.
    - **Ten percent** of local health departments that had a **communicable disease screening and/or treatment program** in 2011 reduced or eliminated it that year.
    - **Nine percent** of local health departments that had an **epidemiology and surveillance program** in 2011 reduced or eliminated it that year.

- Importantly, more than 34,000 local health department jobs (one in every five jobs) have been eliminated since 2008.
    - This loss of professionally trained staff, who handle the technical needs of medical professionals and the informational needs of the public and policymakers, jeopardizes the local health department's ability to respond to public health emergencies swiftly and thoroughly.
    - It also jeopardizes a local health department's ability to do everyday work, which must continue even during emergencies like this one, such as ensuring the food you eat is safe, the water you drink is pure, the air you breathe is clean, and that opportunities for diseases to occur are minimized.

[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2012). Multistate Fungal Meningitis Outbreak Investigation. Retrieved October 26, 2012 from *http://www.cdc.gov/hai/outbreaks/meningitis.html*.
[2] NACCHO. (2012). Local Health Department Job Losses and Program Cuts: Findings from the January 2012 Survey. Retrieved October 26, 2012 from http://www.naccho.org/topics/infrastructure/lhdbudget/upload/Research-Brief-Final.pdf