

STORY FROM THE FIELD

Bay County Health Department— Bay City, MI

Population Served: 107,495

When H1N1 hit in 2009 and 2010, more than 10,000 residents of Bay County, Michigan sought vaccinations from their local health department. To meet the local need, Bay County Health Department staff worked overtime for nearly eight weeks, averaging 60–70 hours of work each week. Fortunately, Bay County was able to vaccinate everyone who requested the immunization, but just barely.

If H1N1 were to strike again today, lack of resources resulting from ongoing budget cuts might force the health department to turn some members of the community away. Bay County's workforce is now 20 percent smaller than it was when the H1N1 crisis occurred, and 40 percent smaller than it was just six years ago. The health department has seen its budget shrink by 10 percent since 2010, and it expects more cuts in the next fiscal year.

Bay County Health Department worries about its ability to respond to other emergencies too. Several years ago, the entire Detroit metropolitan area experienced several days of power outages during the infamous "Northeast Blackout of 2003." "When that happened we had thousands of people coming to Bay County because it was one of the places easily accessible from southeast Michigan that actually had power," said Joel Strasz, Public Health Services Manager. "Imagine if the Detroit metro area had even a minor radiologic event. We would see an inordinate amount of displaced population if this were to occur."

A flood may be the most probable natural disaster because portions of the county lie in a flood plain. "When we had the last flood in 1986," said Strasz, "the health department had well over 100 employees that could be called upon." But with just 45 full time staff today, Strasz thinks it would be very difficult for the health department to respond effectively. "There's a lot that we are lacking as far as resources go."

Due to this shortage of resources, responding to any

emergency would also compromise Bay County's ability to operate its other programs. As Health Director, Barb MacGregor, explains, "We would have to shut down some of our clinics and programs in order to have enough staff [to respond to an emergency.] People might not be able to get their WIC benefits. People might not be able to come in and get their exams and medications... We would have to stop providing those services or provide them on a very limited basis."

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—Barb MacGregor, Health Director

MacGregor's biggest fear is that the county won't be prepared in the event of a large scale disaster or emergency. "We're prepared as best we can be, but you have to have human beings," she said. "You can have all the equipment you want in the world, but if you don't have the people on the ground doing the work, you're not going to be successful. With continued federal cuts to emergency preparedness funding and public health in general, we are being set up to fail."

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