

# STORY FROM THE FIELD

Jackson County Health Department – Jackson, OH Population Served: 33,270

On Nov. 3, 2010, Health Commissioner Greg Ervin breathed a little easier.

But just a little.

That was the day after Jackson County voters passed the replacement levy that would help keep the health department's doors open and programs like "Help Me Grow" intact, albeit in greatly diminished capacity.

The Jackson County Health Department sits nestled in the Appalachian foothills of southern Ohio. Since 2000, Jackson County has operated Help Me Grow, a state- and federally-funded program that provides health and developmental services to expectant parents, young children, and their families.

The program's operating budget experienced deep cuts over the past two years. After falling by 45 percent between 2009 and 2010, the budget will be slashed by another 32 percent in July. In total, the program's operating budget decreased by nearly two-thirds since 2009.

This forced Help Me Grow administrators to alter the program's entry criteria. Initially, all pregnant women and children under three years of age were eligible, but entry is now restricted to first-time mothers and children under six months with several risk factors. Greg Ervin and his staff find this disheartening "because many times a lady may not have complications during her first pregnancy, but she does during the second and third, and that's a population we cannot serve now. So we are not going to be able to do as many home visits. We're not going to be able to get out and identify some of the developmental delays that are going to impact children in our community."

Staff reductions also inhibit the health department's ability to serve the community. Between 2008 and 2011, the health department lost 27 percent of its total workforce. In 2009, all employees were placed on reduced hours. Passage of the

"We're so thin that if anything else happens, it puts almost all of our other programs at risk."—Greg Ervin, Health Commissioner

recent levy has enabled all those wanting to return to full-time employment to do so, but Jackson remains critically understaffed. The community suffers as a result: "In programs like environmental health," explains Greg Ervin, "we have to prioritize our response to complaints, and it takes longer to get to complaints that do not pose a serious health risk."

Although Help Me Grow bore the brunt of the most recent round of budget cuts, not a single program at Jackson County went unscathed. Immunization Action and Public Health Emergency Response, the health department's two other grant programs, also experienced cuts. And, as Greg Ervin explains, "that impacts our general funds programs, too, as we try to allocate dollars into other areas. We might go the entire month before we can really look at our medically handicapped children program...If I don't have a nurse available during the day, we can't provide normal immunizations on a walk-in basis as we'd like to. We're so thin that if anything else happens, it puts almost all of our other programs at risk."

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