

04-11

## STATEMENT OF POLICY

### Local Epidemiology and Surveillance

#### Policy

Public health surveillance and epidemiologic investigation are core functions of local health departments. The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) urges increased federal support for strengthening local health departments' epidemiology and surveillance capacities to promote and improve evidence-based public health practice at local health departments.

NACCHO strongly supports local health departments having dedicated resources for epidemiology staffing and the development of integrated surveillance systems and mechanisms to facilitate access, collection, analysis, and dissemination of accurate local health data. Similarly, NACCHO urges that local- and state-reported data in such systems be equally accessible to local, state, and federal jurisdictions and that local health departments have access to other relevant datasets developed within their locale (e.g., healthcare associated infections data available from the national healthcare safety network from hospitals in their jurisdictions; school performance and attendance databases; and, community health needs assessment data from local public hospitals or other organizations). While policies, strategies, and programs are often developed in partnership with a variety of public, private, and academic partners, government public health agencies have the responsibility to ensure that the public interest is served<sup>1</sup> and as such, NACCHO supports the maintenance of core epidemiological functions at the local level.

#### Justification

Epidemiology and surveillance capacities are essential to assure implementation of the three core functions of public health at the local level. Those core functions are assessment, policy development, and assurance. Epidemiology and surveillance capacities include having systems and sufficiently trained personnel to: 1) rapidly recognize and effectively respond to disease outbreaks, chronic diseases, and other public health issues; 2) monitor and analyze the incidence and prevalence of diseases, risk factors, and conditions of public health significance; 3) provide local health departments and their constituents with accurate and timely data to ensure sufficient resource allocation to areas and populations of greatest need; 4) design public health programs; and 5) evaluate the effectiveness of local programs, interventions, and policies.

Federal funding has a direct impact on local health department capacity in many states and enhanced funding at the national level for these activities has been available through grants such as the Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) and Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC) cooperative agreements since 2001. PHEP funding has decreased by 31% from a peak of \$940 million in 2002<sup>2</sup> with direct implications for local capacity. While the ELC grants have increased overall, these are primarily provided directly to states, with the amount reaching the local level highly variable and, in many cases, not reflective of the national increase.



The strategic assignment of trained epidemiologists for technical assistance and support to local health departments will enable the development of appropriate population-based health metrics, ongoing improvement of public health response protocols and interventions, and improvement of community health outcomes.

Local health department involvement in processes to promote interoperability, integration, and innovation across health information systems will also be key and is addressed in NACCHO's [policy statement on Local Public Health Informatics](#). The increasing availability of electronic information is changing federal, state, and local public health epidemiology and surveillance. It is essential that local public health is included in the ongoing development of data requirements for electronic reporting especially from electronic health records. This will ensure that local public health has the necessary information to address issues of public health significance. In addition, data files of local public health significance that are traditionally stored at the state or federal government levels or by local or regional non-governmental organizations should be readily accessible (directly or through data sharing agreements) to the local health department and be designed for analysis by local staff to address local public health priorities. Data that can be disaggregated by census tract, zip code, county, city, and/or region are integral to developing and implementing evidence-based public health programs, interventions, and priorities.<sup>3</sup>

As experienced in the past several years, emerging diseases such as Ebola and Zika viruses can quickly overwhelm a local health department staff. Epidemiology staff must receive sufficient training to prepare them for responding to emerging diseases and the number of staff maintained or increased should reflect the demand. Data collection and surveillance databases must continually be developed and upgraded to meet the demands of epidemiology staff and expanded infrastructure support is necessary to manage data repositories and analysis.

## **References**

1. Institute of Medicine. 1988. *The Future of Public Health*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Retrieved May 9, 2018 from: <https://www.nap.edu/read/1091/chapter/4>
2. Watson, C. R., Watson, M., & Kirk Sell, T. (2017). Public Health Preparedness Funding: Key Programs and Trends From 2001 to 2017. *American Journal of Public Health, 107 (Suppl 2)*, S165–S167.
3. Luck J., Chang C, Brown E. C., & Lumpkin J. J. (2006). Using local health information to promote public health: issues, barriers, and proposed solutions to improve information flow. *Health Affairs, 25*, 975-991.

## **Record of Action**

*Proposed by NACCHO Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Workgroup*

*Adopted by NACCHO Board of Directors November 7, 2004*

*Updated July 2007*

*Updated October 2010*

*Updated May 2011*

*Updated June 2015*

*Updated May 2018*