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Fortifying Disability Inclusion for COVID-19 Vaccine Access and Emergency Preparedness: **Successes and Lessons Learned**

**Trumbull County Combined Health District, Warren, Ohio**  
(<https://tcchd.org>)



## Background

Trumbull County, Ohio is located in the northeastern corner of the state and borders Pennsylvania. The Trumbull County Combined Health District (TCCHD) is accredited by the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) and serves approximately 200,000 residents in urban and rural communities, including six small cities,\* six villages, and 24 townships. Public health emergencies like COVID-19 have highlighted the importance of collaboration across numerous sectors, organizations and disciplines to address the needs of all people, including people with disabilities.

Centers for Independent Living (CILs) and local health departments (LHDs) both support the health of people with disabilities living in their jurisdictions in different ways. CILs are operated by and for people with disabilities and provide tools and resources to allow them to participate fully in society. Effective collaboration between CILs and LHDs is crucial to ensure that people with disabilities receive adequate, effective, timely, accessible and culturally appropriate services and support. TCCHD had discussed disability inclusion in the past, but as they began to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, they realized a noticeable gap to identify, reach, and communicate vaccine availability to people with limited access and functional needs. As a result, TCCHD applied for and received a grant from NACCHO to assist them in increasing vaccine access for people with disabilities.

## Project Description

TCCHD partnered with the Western Reserve Independent Living Center and uncovered a valuable opportunity to assist with case and contract tracing, and then later, vaccine planning and distribution. Also, as the pandemic progressed and additional cases were identified at a long-term care facility, CIL staff helped set up COVID-19 protocols and safe zones to protect patients receiving dementia treatment onsite. Another key component of the project was developing an action plan with the following goals: 1) Improving collaboration with intention to refer services in Trumbull County focusing on people with disabilities; 2) Improving collaboration emergency preparedness in Trumbull County focusing on people with disabilities; and 3) Identifying people with disabilities who need services in Trumbull County.

The action plan outlines specific action steps; activities; a timeline; benchmarks and achievements; roles and responsibilities; and budget implications. During the collaboration

process, TCCHD realized that the records in its Communication, Maintaining Health, Independence, Safety, Support Services, and Self-Determination, and Transportation or (C-MIST) database provided the number of people with disabilities living in the area, but not their location or contact information. This revelation precipitated a renewed sense of urgency for ongoing collaboration to address this gap in knowledge about how to engage persons with disabilities in the county.

### Challenges

- **Staff Turnover:** A staff member began assembling a manual database of addresses of people with functional needs; however, it was lost following their departure.
- **Communications Gaps:** Not all necessary parties were at the table and receiving communications.

### Solutions

To overcome staff turnover which caused the loss of institutional knowledge, TCCHD is creating a standard operating procedure (SOP) to ensure processes are documented, accessible, and secure. An SOP can also improve quality assurance and help achieve service delivery consistency.

To overcome the communication gaps, TCCHD formed an Emergency Preparedness Coalition Committee that includes more partners at the table including, hospitals, first responders, long-term care facilities, CILs, and a Federally Qualified Health Center.

### Results

TCCHD and the Western Reserve Independent Living Center are now working together to revive the people with disabilities database. The health department is planning to create new brochures promoting and explaining the database's purchase and directions for registering. The Western Reserve Independent Living Center will consult on its development and take the lead disseminating it to their community. The measure of success on their rekindled database effort will be the number of registered individuals.

### The Way Forward

Through this experience, TCCHD realized there isn't a gathering center or shelter to accommodate people who may be displaced due to power outages from a natural or human-caused disaster. The Emergency Preparedness Coalition Committee will work to identify appropriate accessible facilities that can serve this purpose. TCHHD is also updating improvement plans focusing on bio-surveillance, community resilience, incident management, information management, counter measures and mitigation, as well as surge management.

### Key Takeaways

- Having a dedicated staff member for emergency preparedness and response is essential.
- Collaborating with CILs to create accessible public health materials is a win-win.
- Sharing information, resources and ideas between organizations can spark new projects and greater collaboration.



### Words of Wisdom

“One of the best things that came out of the pandemic, as challenging and as difficult as it was, was a recommitment to serving people with access and functional needs. Through our partnership with Western Reserve Independent Living Center, we can revitalize our database registration program, and be better able to serve the disability community.”

—Frank Migliozi, Health Commissioner, TCCHD

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*\*Trumbull County’s cities are Cortland, Girard, Hubbard, Niles, Warren (the county seat), and part of Youngstown.*