

Final Executive Summary

Profile of Health and Public Health Service Delivery in Delaware County, Pennsylvania

March 11, 2010

Prepared by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
under contract with the Delaware County Council

Beth Resnick, MPH, CPH
Susan Rattner, MD
Kathleen Edwards, PhD

Johns Hopkins Office of Public Health Practice and Training
Thomas Burke PhD, MPH, Associate Dean for Public Health Practice and Training

Executive Summary

The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (JHSPH), at the request of the Delaware County Council, developed this Profile of Health and Public Health Service Delivery in Delaware County, Pennsylvania. This Profile, compiled in 2009, includes an overview of Delaware County's current health and public health delivery structure, compilation of community health status indicators, an analysis of community health and public health needs, and development of recommendations to enhance health and public health service quality and efficiency in Delaware County.

Outreach

Outreach efforts consisted of meetings with interested agencies, community organizations, health care providers, and partners, as well as a general community public health survey. The Delaware County Health Advisory Board provided overall guidance and input into the outreach efforts. Although outreach was limited by a number of factors described below, generally the outreach participants were long-term residents of the County, concerned about public health, and interested in enhancing the public health system. Thus, the outreach efforts provided useful input to the study with regards to perceptions, concerns, and understanding of public health in Delaware County, as well as a means to further advance public health.

Hopkins investigators met with representatives from 11 organizations during the Spring-Fall of 2009. The meeting discussion focused on public health in Delaware County, specifically what is working well, areas in need of improvement, and suggestions as to how the identified needs could be met. Given the multitude of agencies and organizations addressing public health issues in Delaware County, along with the study's limited resources and time constraints, the outreach meetings were not an attempt at a complete, in-depth review of the County's public health system, but rather an opportunity to get a general sense of public health in Delaware County and how best to address identified needs. Although the outreach participants represented different organizations with varying missions, perspectives, and operations, there was general consensus on the key results outlined below. Additionally, for the most part, meeting participants were open about their public health concerns, yet overall very positive about living in Delaware County and committed to assisting in enhancing public health.

The public health community survey aimed to gather community input on public health in Delaware County. The brief survey (18 questions) collected basic demographic information on respondents, as well as public health services received, and identified needs, public health concerns, and general comments on public health in Delaware County. Given the inherent limitations of this type of community survey research, such as low response rates and self-reporting, the intent of this survey effort was to provide a point in time, general depiction of Delaware County residents' perceptions of public health, as opposed to a detailed assessment tracked over time.

In an effort to gather input from as many Delaware County residents as possible the survey was available on-line and in a paper version in English, Chinese, French, Punjabe, Hindi and Spanish at the 28 County libraries, eight senior centers and other County community centers. A total of

1,090 surveys were received, 66% on-line and 34% in paper copy and all but one response was in English. With this type of community survey research, rather than focusing on response rates which typically are low (.2% for this survey), it is considered most important to determine if the respondents are representative of the overall population. The survey respondents were not completely representative of the overall Delaware County population, as they were more likely to be female, white, homeowners, English speaking, in better general health, county residents for a longer time period, and have health insurance than the Delaware County population. However, it is important to note that the majority of respondents (86%) indicated that they have lived in Delaware County for over ten years. Thus although respondents are not completely representative of the overall County population, they do provide useful input on public health perceptions and concerns of long-term residents of Delaware County.

Outreach Results

A summary of outreach from both the meetings and community survey is as follows:

- There are many valuable on-going public health initiatives in Delaware County, but much of this work is uncoordinated and the public remains generally unaware of these efforts;
- Public health in Delaware County does not function as a system; there is no known designated public health leader, or centralized structure for public health information;
- Outside of the state-run health clinic, the Pennsylvania State Health Department has very little known presence in Delaware County;
- The existing individual municipal health departments have varying capacities, service provision, and procedures, which can be confusing to residents and businesses with regards to local regulations, what services are provided, and how to access them;
- There is some awareness of emergency response activities in the county, such as drills and exercises, but a general lack of confidence that residents will get necessary information in a timely manner in the event of an emergency;
- The perception that if there were a Delaware County Health Department additional public health funding would be available from State and Federal sources, as well as grants from foundations and other sources;
- Public health needs and concerns highlighted include a Delaware County health department, increased public health information and communication overall, and specifically in areas such as environmental health, emergency preparedness, obesity, and sexually transmitted diseases (STD) prevention and education;
- Health service challenges persist, particularly regarding access to care for underserved populations.

Community Health Indicators

To provide a comprehensive, yet manageable characterization of community health in Delaware County, 28 indicators were compiled and analyzed for Delaware County, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the United States and three comparison jurisdictions, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, Baltimore County, Maryland and New Haven County, Connecticut. In selecting

the indicators, investigators utilized *Healthy People 2010 (HP 2010)*¹, a detailed national agenda for promoting health and preventing disease, disability, and premature mortality based on two overarching goals: (1) to increase the quality and number of years of healthy life and (2) to eliminate health disparities.

Community Health Indicator Findings

The trend for Delaware County is improving for some of the health indicator areas, particularly in the overweight and obesity, mental health, and physical activity areas. There are, however, a number of troubling findings.

Delaware County currently lags behind the nation, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the three comparison counties in a number of the indicator areas including smoking, moderate physical activity, binge drinking, and adults indicating fair or poor health. Additionally, worsening trends in Delaware County are particularly concerning with respect to asthma, drug induced deaths, binge drinking, Chlamydia infections and low birth weight babies. When examining these indicator findings in more detail, clear health disparities exist for underserved populations and specific geographic locations within Delaware County.

These findings indicate that although many public health efforts are ongoing and progress in some areas has been made, there is much need for a concerted effort by elected officials, County residents, government agencies, health care providers, non-profits, coalitions, commissions, and all other interested parties to enhance the health of all Delaware County residents.

Recommendations

This study has provided an opportunity for Delaware County, Pennsylvania to examine the public health status of its residents, with an aim toward maintaining good health and improving troubling health indicators. The goal of this study was to assess the county's public health status, find gaps, and provide recommendations as to how best to address identified needs. The study was not designed to address the question of whether Delaware County should establish a county health department. However, the establishment of a county health department in Delaware County was repeatedly raised by outreach meeting and survey participants and there was an apparent effort by some interested parties in the community to encourage survey respondents to include a comment on the need for a county health department, thus investigators felt an obligation to acknowledge the issue. The ultimate matter, however, in the view of the investigators, is felt to hinge on the broader issue of what is the overall public health status of Delaware County residents and how can it be improved? Thus, the recommendations offered are not focused on a specific public health structure, but rather are geared toward building on existing strengths in the County to support enhancing the County's public health system with the ultimate goal of forward movement of health for all Delaware County residents. In working to improve health for all Delaware County residents, the health status indicator findings provide opportunities to further address health disparities in the County.

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Healthy People 2010: Understanding and Improving Health*. 2nd ed. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, November 2000.

The legal history of public health in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania provides an important backdrop for this study and the resulting recommendations. From the outset, as reflected in Pennsylvania laws, public health's scope and functions have been legislated in an environmental-health focused manner. An examination of Pennsylvania's existing laws that allow for the creation, joining with, or dissolution of local health departments revealed a more historical public health focus. This study focused on Delaware County and did not address the nature of Pennsylvania public health law; however, as noted within the recommendations further legal review and analysis may be beneficial to advancing public health in Delaware County.

The recommendations focus on options currently available to Delaware County to enhance the public health system in order to promote and maintain the good health of residents and to best deal with any less than optimal health indicators. These recommendations are offered to Delaware County elected officials, governmental agencies, public health organizations, and County residents as a means to work collaboratively to achieve the best results possible in moving health indicators in a positive direction.

The following four recommendations are offered:

1. Leadership

Designate and develop public awareness and recognition of a Delaware County public health leader

Outreach efforts revealed strong perceptions and concerns regarding a public health leadership void in the County, particularly in the areas of emergency preparedness and general public health outreach and communication. A public health leader needs to be identified, with specific roles and functions delineated. Most importantly, this leadership role needs to be communicated and demonstrated to the public

2. Collaboration, communication and coordination

Build on existing public health efforts through increased collaboration, communication and coordination

Outreach efforts indicated a number of valuable, on-going public health initiatives in Delaware County, yet these efforts often were not coordinated or well-known to the public. A centralized system for general public health information and services was cited as a major public health need. Building on the agencies and organizations in the community that provide regular and ongoing services and information on a variety of public health issues and concerns, the County should design expanded and coordinated communication, collaboration and service structures. These structures will allow residents to gain awareness of and have ample access to available public health services and information. Additionally, these efforts should be aimed at not only the general population, but also targeted to underserved populations. Evaluation mechanisms should be put in place to assure that these efforts are achieving desired goals.

3. Research to strengthen infrastructure and obtain additional resources

Conduct further research on how best to enhance the County's public health system, with particular regard to strengthening infrastructure and obtaining additional resources

In order to effectively implement these recommendations and sustain these efforts, a strengthened public health infrastructure with additional resources will be required. Further research in the areas below will aid in this effort.

- Examination of public health structures not only in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, but throughout the country geared towards identifying approaches suitable for Delaware County;
- Exploration of potential public health funding opportunities including non-governmental sources, as well as collaborations with interested parties, such as local, state and national organizations, academic institutions, and other relevant entities; and
- Analysis of Pennsylvania public health laws to identify possible options to address identified public health infrastructure and resource gaps.

4. Oversight and evaluation

Establish a County public health task force, or other similar entity, with the responsibility and authority to oversee and evaluate the implementation of these recommendations

In order to assure the implementation of these recommendations and the sustainability of these efforts, a task force, or similar entity, should be established. In order to assure the effectiveness of this task force, it is recommended that members be appointed by County elected officials and include representation from government agencies, non-profit and community groups, and health care provider organizations. Additionally, the task force should be granted the responsibility and authority to oversee implementation of these study recommendations, as well as the development and tracking of specific performance measures to be presented to County officials and the public on a regular basis.