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Partners advancing CDC strategy

Revitalization of environmental public health services on agenda

FROM FOOD safety inspections to regulations on animal waste run-off, environmental health advances during the past 100 years have directly led to healthier, longer lives for Americans.

Despite their value, however, the nation's environmental public health services are often overlooked: Even as new challenges such as hantavirus and West Nile virus emerge, the environmental health work force continues to shrink, and public awareness of the field's value is low.

To tackle the problem, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has teamed up with public and private partners on a strategy to revitalize the nation's environmental public health services. Unveiled in September 2003, the strategy outlines a course for addressing the broad range of environmental health issues facing communities and states.

"Environmental public health workers are sometimes referred to as the 'invisible work force,'" said Tracy Kolian, MPH, APHA policy analyst. "When they are doing their jobs well, the public seldom knows they exist. But the services they provide are vital to the health of our nation."

The 40-page strategy contains six main goals: building capacity, supporting research, fostering leadership, developing the work force, creating partnerships and communicating information. Each of the goals contains specific objectives. By supporting research, for example, strategy planners hope to better identify factors that lead to disease outbreaks.

Among the partners working to address the goals and objectives of the plan is APHA. Specifically, the Association is educating policy-makers at the national and state levels on the importance of environmental public health services. To reach its target audience, the Association is creating an environmental public health services brochure, developing a Web site and designing state fact sheets on environmental public health.

"APHA has a vital role in educating the decision-makers, whether they are local health boards are legislators," said APHA member Patrick Bohan, MSEH, MS, RS, an assistant professor of environmental health science at East Central University in Ada, Okla., who is serving as an informal adviser on APHA's work.

By acting on the strategy's goals, supporters hope to counteract shortfalls in the nation's environmental public health services.

Photo by Tim Boyle, courtesy Getty Images

Eric Chovanec, a field operator with the Northwest Mosquito Abatement District in Niles, Ill., examines mosquito larvae from a catch basin in 2002 as part of district efforts on West Nile virus. The virus is one of many new challenges facing environmental public health service workers.

Among the challenges faced today is the size of the environmental health work force. Although a 1988 federal report predicted a need for 372,000 environmental public health workers, a recent report estimated there were fewer than 20,000 such workers in the United States, representing just 4.5 percent of the public health work force. Low pay scales, minimal advancement opportunities and an aging work force contribute to the problem, according to the strategy.

Environmental health issues also continue to grow more complex. While early environmental health workers were concerned with issues such as rodents, water safety and sanitation, a typical workload can now encompass issues such as radon screening, lead poisoning, terrorism and chemical contamination.

Because environmental public health services are fragmented between health departments, environmental agencies and other authorities, workers can have difficulty coordinating their activities, according to Bohan. Many workers in environmental health services also lack formal public health training, coming instead from backgrounds such as biology or chemistry, he said.

"Many of the new public health problems that have developed recently have been environmentally related," said Bohan, a former chair of APHA's Environment Section. "We need a system in place that can adequately respond, and we need an environmental public health work force that has the preparation to do it."

APHA materials promoting environmental public health services and the CDC strategy will be available at a booth at the 132nd APHA Annual Meeting and Exposition, which will be held Nov. 6–10 in Washington, D.C.

For a copy of "A National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services," visit <www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs>. For more on APHA's work on the strategy, e-mail <tracy.kolian@apha.org> or call (202) 777-2435. ■

— *Michele Late*

JOURNAL WATCH

Highlights from the July issue of APHA's *American Journal of Public Health*

HIV-positive mothers should breastfeed

HIV-positive mothers who breastfeed their infants for the first six months of life not only reduce the risk of mother-to-child HIV transmission, they also increase the baby's chances of survival, according to a July *AJPH* study.

Researchers used a spreadsheet simulation model to predict HIV-free survival for babies who live in "resource-poor settings" such as developing countries. Breastfeeding for a baby's first six months increased HIV-free survival by 32 per 1,000 live births. After six months, however, formula-feeding gave a child the best chance to survive and avoid HIV exposure, the study found.

U.N. agencies currently recommend HIV-infected mothers avoid breastfeeding. (Page 1,174)

Poverty significantly ups risk for HIV

The nation's homeless and poor continue to face much higher risks of HIV than the general population, and a July study in APHA's *American Journal of Public Health* showed the risk is five times greater among indigent adults.

A study of 2,508 adults living in San Francisco homeless shelters found an almost 11 percent HIV-positive rate among that population. For homeless men who had sex with other men, the rate was nearly 30 percent. Sexual activity appears to have a much greater impact on HIV risk than injection drug use, which also is a widespread problem among the homeless.

"Indigent urban adults appear to be the 'new faces' of HIV in the United States who will carry the heaviest burden of the HIV epidemic into the third decade," the study's authors wrote. "Broad structural classes such as poverty, class, racism and homophobia should be studied to better inform interventions." (Page 1,207)

On-screen smoking encourages teens

Cigarette smoking in movies is a covert tobacco marketing strategy that continues to encourage smoking among adolescents, according to a July *AJPH* study based on interviews with thousands of teens.

Researchers interviewed almost 3,000 12- to-15-year-olds who had never smoked and who participated in the California Tobacco Survey. When asked to name their favorite screen actors, youth who named actors who smoked on-screen were much more likely to try cigarettes in the future. One-third of those surveyed named actors who portrayed smokers in the movies.

"Public health efforts to reduce adolescent smoking must confront smoking in films as a tobacco marketing strategy," the study's authors wrote. (Page 1,239)

Prisons need better HIV, hepatitis plans

Hepatitis infection is widespread in the prison population, according to an *AJPH* study of inmates at a Rhode Island prison.

Researchers found a 20 percent prevalence rate of hepatitis B and C among inmates at the Rhode Island Correctional Institute, and the population had a 1.8-percent HIV prevalence rate. The concern is not only for increased infection among incarcerated men but also for the larger surrounding community in the vicinity of prisons and jails.

"Our data and that of other studies suggest that activities to prevent transmission of hepatitis in a correctional setting are important for both inmates and correctional staff," the study authors wrote.

Although federal health officials recommend routine hepatitis B vaccination for prison inmates, only two of 36 correctional systems surveyed provided such vaccinations. (Page 1,218) ■

— *Donya C. Arias*