

## TITLE

Using State-Local Partnerships to Build the EPHT Infrastructure in Maryland

## THEME

Foster Collaborations Among Health and the Environment

## KEYWORDS

local health departments, laboratories, local environmental health practice, water quality, private wells, public drinking water, ambient water monitoring, data workflow, data exchange, infrastructure, cooperation, stakeholders

## BACKGROUND

The Maryland EPHT team has been working with several local health departments (LHDs) to build relationships and identify needs for water data exchange. The need for this partnership became apparent because different LHDs were collecting, storing and reporting data in various ways, and the state's public health laboratory at the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) was planning for direct electronic requesting and reporting of tests. There is no mechanism for direct input of water quality data at many LHDs and Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE).

## OBJECTIVE(S)

1) To create local partnerships, to understand core data needs and current data workflow in the environmental health (EH) units of LHDs, and to recommend IT standards for use by LHDs throughout the state. 2) To design and obtain funding for a distributed network for electronic data flow between LHDs, laboratories, MDE, and DHMH.

## METHOD(S)

The partnership and planning group consists of the Maryland Association of County Health Officers (Chair), LHDs, state agencies, and members of the EPHT Planning Consortium. EPHT members are conducting on-site assessments of core data needs and data workflow in LHDs, with special attention to water quality issues (private and public drinking water testing, ambient water monitoring). In a parallel process for the second objectives, the EPHT staff recruited a broader set of planners for a statewide network to facilitate the distribution of water quality data between LHDs, laboratories, and MDE. Private laboratories were surveyed about their ability and willingness to report results electronically.

## RESULT(S)

Four LHDs are participating in the first phase of the project, focused on private and public drinking water and ambient water quality data collected at the local level. There is considerable variation in the data capture and data management between LHDs. The view of EPHT at the state level does not necessarily match the needs of local EH practice.

Three state-level water programs (public drinking water, private wells and STORET), as well as various laboratories, are participating in the second set of objectives. Most private labs are willing to report data to MDE electronically. The exchange network as currently conceived has a modular design, and other data domains and partners can be added

incrementally. An EPA Environmental Exchange Information Network Challenge Grant application has been submitted for achieving the second objective. Questions about data control and confidentiality need to be explored.

## **DISCUSSION/RECOMMENDATION(S)**

These results provide the basis for designing a distributed network for collecting and exchanging water data. Input from field staff, laboratories, data managers, and data users will increase the chances of optimum design and implementation.

If EPHT is to be useful for all environmental health practitioners, it must take the needs of LHDs as well as state and national agencies into account. Involvement of local partners is essential to the success of this project and to EPHT as a whole.

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