

# breakout ABSTRACT



## TITLE

Building Local Environmental Health Surveillance Capacity in Oregon

## THEME

Foster Collaborations Among Health and the Environment

## KEYWORDS

community partners, needs assessment, capacity building, data tracking, training

## BACKGROUND

A survey of Local Health Departments (LHDs) around environmental health (EH) was conducted in 2001 to determine the priority EH concerns, and to some extent the LHD capacity to address these concerns. The data inventory exercise and building of the Planning Consortium identified many potential partners, with unknown EH capacity and resources.

## OBJECTIVE(S)

Oregon's EPHT (OR-EPHT) wanted to determine current EH capacity and identify priorities and preferred mechanisms for supporting LHDs and other partners. The program would then pursue projects to enable LHDs and other organizations to build their capacity to identify, understand, monitor, and respond to environmental public health issues, concerns and events.

## METHOD(S)

A LHD needs assessment was completed in 2004. Concerns and needs of other partners, such as non-governmental organizations and tribes, were assessed informally. Based upon this information and in collaboration with partners, OR-EPHT designed a mini-grant program, with minimal application and administrative burden, and notified a large variety of potential applicants. Technical assistance was also offered to successful applicants. We also added questions to a state-wide survey to determine where Oregonians seek information about EH concerns.

## RESULT(S)

Sixty percent of LHDs responding to the needs assessment have some capacity to address environmental public health concerns, yet many have very limited funding and capabilities. Most lack the ability to collect data on calls received, much less analyze for trends and patterns. OR-EPHT designed mini-grants in collaboration with partners from the Planning Consortium, Advisory Committee, and the Council of Local Health Officials. Because funds were limited, OR-EPHT focused on building sustainable programs and training rather than short-term project funding. Six LHDs applied and all were funded. No other type of organization applied for a mini-grant. Funding was offered for creation or enhancement of environmental health surveillance databases, the provision of training, or building communication or outreach programs. Funded projects include development of GIS databases, web sites, community environmental health consortia, uniform housing inspection forms, culturally competent outreach, and enhanced surveillance, including asthma tracking. Collaboration among mini-grantees is limited and they have not pursued technical or other assistance from OR-



EPHT. When formal training applicable to most projects was offered, grantees readily accepted. Grantee reports demonstrate continued enthusiastic progress. At least one other state EPHT program has adopted Oregon's mini-grant model.

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

Oregon's needs assessment survey was effective in ascertaining LHD capacity and identifying data gathering and training needs. However, not all responded, and, given their limited resources, many are not engaged in EPHT. Six out of thirty LHDs applied for mini-grant funding; we therefore view these grants as a first step in engaging other LHDs, tribal health organizations, and other community-based organizations. Success will be defined by the sustainability of LHD projects and by enhanced resources to assist the community with environmental concerns.

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