

Case Statement in Support of a Lancaster County Public Health Department



I. Partnership for a County Public Health Department

The Partnership for a County Public Health Department, a coalition of local health care organizations, is launching a campaign to improve the health of Lancaster County residents through creation of a Lancaster County Public Health Department. A county health system would coordinate efforts to safeguard the health of the children and families of Lancaster County in the face of mounting concern about disease outbreaks and other health disasters, increasing threats to local water supplies, and a growing gap in preventive health care for children.

The Partnership has completed studies showing that a county public health department can bring local control of public health to Lancaster County in a cost-effective way. An effective county public health department would lead public-private efforts to deliver childhood immunizations and other health screenings to prevent disease, prepare and coordinate local response to infectious disease outbreaks and other countywide healthy threats, ensure clean water supplies, and promote healthy practices.

II. Public Health Needs and Challenges in a Changing Lancaster County

Lancaster County is growing and changing. It is the sixth largest county in Pennsylvania with more than 490,000 residents,¹ growing at a rate three-and-a-half times the population growth of Pennsylvania as a whole. The county is becoming more diverse. The white, non-Hispanic population of the county fell from 93% of the population in 1990 to just over 88% in 2004.

Troubling health conditions. While analysis of health conditions and needs shows that local trends in many public health areas are improving, there are reasons for concern in many other areas, including several affecting children:²

- Only about one-half of mothers receive early and adequate prenatal care.
- The infant death rate exceeds the state rate and far exceeds the national Healthy People 2010 standard.
- The child death rate (ages one to four) is 50% higher than the state rate and more than double the Healthy People 2010 standard.
- Illness from vaccine preventable diseases is on the rise, as are sexually transmitted diseases like gonorrhea and chlamydia.
- Death rates from stroke, asthma, and melanoma are all worse than the state rate.

Vulnerable water supplies. There are numerous risks to local water quality from nutrient and chemical pollution, widespread failure of on-lot septic systems that can produce nitrate, fecal coli form and fecal staphococcus bacterial contamination of groundwater, and industrial pollution. There has been a recent increase in giardiasis incidences, a diarrheal illness caused by water borne parasite. Yet there are few support services for private well owners in Lancaster County.

Uneven food safety. As the past E. coli outbreak in spinach demonstrated, the threat of food-borne infectious diseases is a serious one. In Lancaster County, the incidence of such food-borne contamination from salmonella and campylobacter is much higher than in the rest of the state and much higher than the national 2010 target.

Strained public health system. Fortunately, the county has an abundance of health care provider organizations, delivering essential public health services to those in need. However, the needs are great. For example, thousands of county residents, including an estimated 11,000 children, are without health care.³ The ability to meet these health needs is strained by decreasing numbers of health care professionals and dwindling funding resources. Though schools have historically offered children some basic screening and preventive care, local school districts currently provide a ratio of nurses to students significantly below the state average and the national target.

III. Meeting the Future Public Health Needs of Lancaster County

Creation of a Lancaster County Department of Public Health would bolster the county's ability to meet its public health needs.

A. What the county public health department would do

A Lancaster County Department of Public Health would do the following:

- **Track and investigate health problems and hazards in the community.** A public health department collects data to drive specific activities to monitor and control multiple health and environmental threats: communicable and chronic diseases; food, water contamination; biological, chemical, and radiological hazards; and public health disasters.
- **Prepare for and respond to public health emergencies, including bio- and agri-terrorism and pandemic.** A public health department will provide leadership and work with other community service providers in preparing for health disasters. It will link with local, county, state, and federal authorities to ensure that local surveillance and response measures address any and all possible threats, such as bioterrorism or a flu pandemic.
- **Improve access to health services.** A public health department connects people with personal health services, including preventive and health promotion services in the community. For example, it can promote outreach efforts to enroll more local children in the Medical Assistance or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). It can also advocate for development of needed programs and services in underserved populations and continuously monitor the quality and accessibility of public health services county-wide.
- **Deliver health education.** A public health department educates the public on key health care issues, including the importance of disease-prevention and how to maintain healthy

lifestyles. This would include prevention education for children and youth to head off risky behaviors like teen drug and alcohol use and sexual activity.

B. Benefits of the county public health department

The creation of a county public health department can make a difference in several ways:

- **Improve the public's health.** A 1990's study found that Pennsylvania counties with a local health department showed greater improvement in reaching the national Healthy People 2010 goals in breast cancer, colon cancer, lung cancer, and coronary heart disease than counties without local health departments.
- **Strengthen local control.** A county public health department would bring control of key government duties from Harrisburg to Lancaster County, improving decision-making and providing a stronger local voice.
- **Streamline government.** It would eliminate fragmentation and reduce bureaucracy by consolidating authority from three state departments (the Departments of Agriculture, Health, and Environmental Protection) into a single public county health department. This consolidation also allows standardization of environmental efforts across municipalities.
- **Increase county access to federal and state funds.** County health departments are eligible for state reimbursement for public health activities and federal and state grant funds for special programs, such as bio-terrorism, maternal and child health, and water and sewer monitoring. Without a health department now, Lancaster County does not get these dollars. These federal and state funds can help support the current over-burdened system.
- **Improve efficiency and reduce duplication.** Lancaster County is blessed to have many wonderful government, private, and volunteer providers of health services. A county public health department would not supplant these activities, but help coordinate them to increase efficiency, reduce duplication, and respond more effectively to local emergencies.

C. The cost of the county public health department

The Partnership has developed a proposal for a lean public health department infrastructure that would minimize costs through efficient business practices and effective public-private partnerships with other agencies and organizations. The annual budget for the first full year of a department of public health is estimated to be \$1,512,000. But sufficient revenue can be generated through grants, contributions, and shifting user fees and licenses from the state to the local level, so that there would be minimal effect on the county treasury.

Most of the funding needed to operate a county public health department would come from state reimbursements (under Acts 315 and 12) for taking on responsibilities now handled by state agencies and from federal and state grants for bioterrorism or pandemic preparedness, maternal and child health, prevention of communicable diseases, and other public health purposes. A small proportion of the revenues (about one-quarter of revenues) would be generated from user

fees and licenses, contributions, and the county's general budget. The county general budget would only need to produce about 7 - 10% of the department budget, or \$110,000, the first year. That represents an estimated return on the local county's investment of nearly 14-to-1.

D. Operation of the public health department

Based on state mandates, the County Public Health Department will have a five-member Board of Health appointed by the County Commissioners. The Board will include at least two physicians. Operations will be overseen by a paid Health Department Director who is responsible for securing funding, staff, facility, and equipment. The Director will manage the Department of Health and assure delivery of services as outlined in the state approved Plan.

IV. Support

Several key partners have provided financial support to the exploration phase of the Partnership for a County Public Health Department: Ephrata Community Hospital, Heart of Lancaster Regional Medical Center, [Lancaster General Hospital](#), Lancaster Osteopathic Health Foundation, Lancaster Regional Medical Center, St. Joseph Health Ministries, and United Way of Lancaster County. The Steering Committee for the Partnership has completed its research and has determined that a local public health department would bring valuable new resources to Lancaster County, including significant funding. Therefore, it is recommending that the community move forward to establish Lancaster County Public Health Department and is soliciting the support and endorsement of its funding partners and other stakeholders. To date, numerous stakeholders responded positively to the proposed plan and have submitted letters of support.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts. 2005 Estimate.

² Feasibility Study: Establishing a Department of Public Health in Lancaster County, Presented to United Way of Lancaster County by Drexel University School of Public Health, April 29, 2005.

³ Children's Health Strategy Team, United Way of Lancaster County,
http://www.uwlanc.org/template.asp?nav_id=296&sec=15