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Instruments Aimed At Local, State Levels: New Tools Can Be Used To Gauge Public Health Services

State and local health officials will soon have new tools to help them assess how well their public health systems are working.

The National Public Health Performance Standards Program is planning to release evaluation instruments that officials can use to compile and evaluate data on the services provided through their public health systems. The local, state and governance instruments are expected to be released for use later this year, following final review by federal officials.

"In order for public health systems to improve, they must be able to measure how well they are doing," said APHA Executive Director and state health officials to measure their performance against model public health standards. If there are gaps, the models will point the way for policy-makers to follow."

The evaluation instruments are the work of a partnership between APHA, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Association of County and City Health Officials, National Association of Local Boards of Health and Public Health Foundation.

The instruments focus on the 10 essential services of public health, established in 1994, which define the core functions of public health. Such services include investigating health problems, educating the public and enforcing regulations that protect health and safety.

Each instrument contains "yes" or "no" questions on the essential public health services. The State Public Health System Performance Assessment Instrument, for example, asks users whether surveillance systems are periodically reviewed, if epidemiologic expertise is used to identify health hazards or if health education and promotion programs are designed to reach targets in specific settings.

To use the instruments, state and local health officials examine the components of their public health systems - including health departments, hospitals, health organizations, providers and health workers - and then provide answers for the questions. Once the questionnaire is complete, the data are submitted to CDC, which will generate a report for the jurisdiction detailing how well its services compare to the model standards.

The instruments also contain questions related to bioterrorism preparedness, which state and local health officials can use to assess their readiness. The instruments will be especially relevant for states when deciding where to use new federal funds designated specifically for improving preparedness.

"The National Public Health Performance Standards are the only assessment instruments that address the overall performance and capacity of the public health system," said Karlene Baddy, MEd, director of the Public Health Innovations Project. "Using the standards will provide states a broad context for developing bioterrorism capacities."

The instruments were tested in eight states and 300 jurisdictions before being approved by the partner organizations. Once federal officials give their approval, the partner organizations will begin distributing the instruments and provide a guide to their use.

APHA has pledged to help develop a field manual that will explain the instruments to public health workers and to market the program to workers nationwide.

Final drafts of two of the instruments are online now and can be accessed through the APHA Web site.

The State Public Health System Performance Assessment Instrument is online at <www.apha.org/ppp/hipmain/statefinal.pdf>. The Local Public Health System Performance Assessment Instrument is at <www.apha.org/ppp/hipmain/localfinal.pdf>. The governance instrument is entering final review and will be available in coming months.

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