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Public Health Performance Standards Launched

Long-anticipated tools that will help state and local health officials gauge how well their public health systems are working were officially unveiled in June.

The National Public Health Performance Standards Program, created through the collaboration of five public health organizations and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was launched at a summit at APHA headquarters in Washington, D.C. The standards, which consist of three assessment instruments, allow health officials to compile and evaluate data on the services provided through their public health systems.

"These performance standards will provide guidance to states and local communities as they work to revitalize their public health systems," said APHA Executive Director Mohammad N. Akhter, MD, MPH.

The completion of the standards was the result of a four-year development and testing process involving hundreds of local and state public health officials. National partners on the standards were APHA, CDC, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, National Association of County and City Health Officials, National Association of Local Boards of Health and Public Health Foundation.

The partners plan to market the standards to health officials nationwide and distribute a manual on their use.

"If we are going to change our public health system, we have to be open about where we are strong and where we are weak," said Paul Halverson, MD, director of the Division of Public Health Systems Development and Research at CDC's Public Health Practice Program Office.

The National Public Health Performance Standards Program includes three tools: a state-level instrument for assessment of state public

health systems, a local instrument for local systems and a governance instrument for local governing bodies such as local boards of health. The instruments contain questions on essential public health services, which users answer by examining their health systems.

Before being approved by the partner organizations, the instruments were tested in nine states and hundreds of jurisdictions. Feedback from users has shown that the instruments can be a helpful tool in assessing health services.

In Livingston County, N.Y., health officials had a "very successful experience" in their test of the local instruments, said Joan Ellison, RN, MPH, the county health department's director.

"It allowed us to identify gaps in services, identify gaps in the public health system," Ellison said. "(The instruments) really do provide an accurate assessment of how a local public health system works."

Ed Baker, MD, MPH, director of CDC's Public Health Practice Program Office, commended the organizations that worked on the standards for their "vision and dedication to improving the practice of public health and safeguarding the health of people across the country."

For more information, call (202) 777-2494.

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