

May 2003

Performance Standards Gaining Acceptance: New Governance Instrument Joins Local, State Tools

A set of APHA-endorsed performance assessment instruments are helping state and local health officials across the country analyze and improve the way their public health systems work.

The tools are part of the National Public Health Performance Standards Program, a collaborative effort that is working to strengthen the nation's public health systems so that they are strong enough to effectively deliver essential public health services.

Last year, the program debuted two of its assessment tools: a state-level instrument for examination of state public health systems and a local instrument for local systems. In April, a third assessment instrument was unveiled by the National Public Health Performance Standards Program. The newest instrument, which focuses on governance, is designed for use by local governing bodies such as local boards of health.

"Strengthening the capabilities of our public health systems is of utmost importance to the nation's health, especially now," said APHA Executive Director Georges Benjamin, MD, FACP. "These instruments will help health officials identify the strengths and weaknesses of their health services, and ultimately, improve the way they respond to both the daily demands of public health and emergencies."

APHA is one of six national partners that are working on the National Public Health Performance Standards Program with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which is leading the effort through its Public Health Practice Program Office. The other partners are the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, National Association of County and City Health Officials, National Association of

Local Boards of Health, National Network of Public Health Institutes and Public Health Foundation.

The completion of the three instruments was the result of a four-year development and testing process that involved hundreds of health professionals nationwide. Before the National Public Health Performance Standards Program was officially launched last summer, the three instruments were tested in nine states and hundreds of local public health systems.

Since their unveiling, three states -- Colorado, New Mexico and Oklahoma -- have used the final versions of both the state and local instruments to examine their health systems, according to CDC. Kentucky and Arkansas have used the local instrument.

In May, New Jersey is expected to be the first state to begin using the new governance tool statewide. Other states have shown interest in the three instruments and are expected to implement their use in coming months.

To use the instruments, state and local health officials identify the components of their public health systems - including health departments, hospitals, health organizations, providers, community groups and schools - and bring together system stakeholders. Together, they review and complete the assessment instrument, which contains questions linked to essential public health services and model performance standards.

Once the assessment is complete, the data are submitted to CDC through a special Web site, which generates a report with performance scores, charts, graphs and suggestions on how to use the results for quality improvement.

"Health officials who use the instruments can clearly see where they need improvement and then chart a path to strengthening their systems," said Karlene Baddy, MEd, director of the Public Health Innovations Project at APHA.

A new study by researchers with the University of Kentucky confirms the usefulness of the instruments. In the study, published in the May issue of the *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*, researchers looked at the completeness, achievability and importance of the model standards, made site visits to states where the state and

local instruments were used during their testing phase and interviewed health officials who'd worked with them.

The researchers concluded that the state and local instruments are valid measures of public health performance, calling them an "important and useful new tool to further enhance and strengthen public health infrastructure."

"They measure what they are supposed to measure," said F. Douglas Scutchfield, MD, director of the Center for Health Services Management and Research at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, who is one of the study's authors. "We now have valid instruments that people should go about the process of using. It provides a benchmark for you to know how well you are doing, so you can improve and measure again."

In April, CDC officials mailed about 4,000 copies of an informational binder on the National Public Health Performance Standards Program to state and local health departments, schools of public health, APHA Affiliates and other health organizations. Additional resources on the instruments, including a user's guide, answers to frequently asked questions, a glossary and other educational materials will be available for download from the APHA Web site in May at www.apha.org/ppp/hipmain.htm.

Copies of the state, local and governance assessment instruments can be downloaded on the APHA Web page as well.

For more information on the National Public Health Performance Standards Program, visit www.phppo.cdc.gov/nphsp, e-mail phpsp@cdc.gov or call (800) 747-6049. For more on the May issue of the Journal of Public Health Management and Practice, which focuses on public health systems, visit www.lww.com and click on the tab for "journals."

- Michele Late