

Public Health: A look at the effects of 10 Years of Funding Cuts *Where do we go now?*

In the last 10 years, the economic recession, chronic under investment, the erosion of local funding and unfunded mandates has increasingly decimated public health. Even more devastating, was the Motor Vehicle Excise Tax (MVET) elimination, which was a result of voters passing Tim Eyman's Initiative 695 in 2000.

All of these factors have crippled local health jurisdictions doing the critical work of public health—protecting communities in ways that health insurance companies or medical care providers cannot. Public Health is a critical infrastructure that benefits us daily, yet goes unnoticed when all is well—when there are no outbreaks of pandemic flu, increases in Tuberculosis incidents, or tainted water coming out of taps. When nothing happens, that is when public health is doing its job well.

However, in a bad economy, the need for a strong public health system goes up. Unemployment rates rise, which means more people lose their income and health insurance, and the need for health information and education that comes through the public health system increases. Everyone prefers to be healthy—and prevention is the most cost effective way to put health back into health care.

Public health programs help to promote healthy communities and lifestyles, reduce the spread of communicable diseases and provide rapid responses to public health emergencies. It helps detect and stop disease outbreaks, protects drinking water and food, provides immunizations, helps new parents give babies a healthy start both nutritionally and at home, and inspects schools and day cares for health and safety.

Now, the impact of 10 years of funding shortages has resulted in layoffs, budget cuts, and furloughs, which also undermine the local health jurisdictions ability to do their important work.

The saying “do more with less” is something that too many local health jurisdictions know too well. But that's not the only tragedy of 10 years of plummeting financial support of public health. There has been a drop in child immunization rates, while at the same time; there have been increases in tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases, measles and whooping cough, and infant mortality.



Sadly, because of these declines, Washington achieved only five out of 10 key indicators of public health emergency preparedness in the annual report: “Ready or Not? Protecting the Public's Health from Diseases, Disasters, and Bioterrorism,” which was released in December 2009. That means communities are not as prepared as they could be, which could be tragic if disaster strikes.

That is why having a long-term, sustainable stable funding source, and local support is critically important. We know that prevention works and costs less, so why are we eroding systems that help our communities be healthy and utilize our resources more responsibly?

The current system is inadequately funded.

At Local 17, we have lobbied and continue to lobby and work in coalition and scratch and fight for every penny, every year for public health. Public health members have come to Olympia to help lobby and have participated in campaigns for public health. They know that lack of funding equates to thousands of services not being delivered to the most vulnerable populations and systems.

So, now the Legislature is back in session to determine what vulnerable populations or services will be further cut or whether or not citizens will step up and pay for a much needed tax to support public health.

A tax would help and there is a glimmer of hope in this \$2.6 billion deficit session—House Bill 2388, which was filed by Representative Jim Moeller (D-49) calls for a tax on candy and gum. Neither candy or gum are real foods, and neither is necessary or even healthy, so a tax won't affect people who are buying food to survive. The passage of this bill will be an important step in the right direction for public health districts and departments across the state and, ultimately, for the health of all communities.

PUBLIC HEALTH ACTION ALERT, What you can do:

You can call your legislators on the legislative hotline at 1.800.562.6000 and remind them to support HB 2388 to help fund public health. — *By Roberta Burnett, Local 17 Union Representative*



Please post and distribute at your workplace