

# **PROMOTING AND PROTECTING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES**

*An Elected Official's Guide to Public Health*



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Dear Elected Official:

As County Executive, I view my role in promoting and protecting the health of all county residents to be among my most important responsibilities.

Achievements in public health have greatly reduced our susceptibility to infectious diseases and helped us identify and modify unhealthy behaviors. But In the post 9/11 world, the threat of man-made disasters and bioterrorism, as well as the advent of deadly diseases and their threat of global pandemics makes guarding our communities against public health risks is an increasingly difficult challenge.

As an elected official in your community, you serve on the front line of homeland security and have a unique responsibility to understand and participate in the public health system.

The information in this booklet has been compiled to better acquaint you with the public health system, help define your role in promoting and protecting public health and help you advocate for the most effective public health services for your constituents in these uncertain times.

We hope you find it helpful as you continue to work to strengthen you community's approach to emergency response and preparedness.

Sincerely,

Joseph A. Griffo  
County Executive

## **What Is Public Health?**

Experts have defined public health as “an organized community effort aimed at the prevention of disease and the promotion of health.” Unlike our *health care* system, which provides services to individual citizens, our *public health* system focuses on the *population as a whole*. At the local level, Oneida County public health is about promoting a healthy community.

Public health affects all of us, all of the time. Public health efforts have increased our life span by nearly years during the past century. Today people live longer because public health activities have helped us recognize the effects and reduce the spread of infectious diseases that once cut life short for the entire population. Public health efforts also teach us to modify unhealthy behaviors that place us at risk for disease and premature death.

Everyday activities we take for granted like drinking clean water, breathing clean air, eating a balance diet, or wearing seatbelts while driving are benefits that we owe the public health system that is dedicated to making good health available to all of us.

Oneida County’s public health system involves many players including the Oneida County Health Department which has the responsibility of ensuring public health and employing professionals such as physicians, epidemiologists, social workers, nurses and environmental health specialists. The Oneida County Health Department relies on medical professionals in the private sector to perform health functions and help patients practice prevention. Police and fire departments play a crucial role in ensuring public safety and well-being. Architects, developers, city planners and traffic design specialists contribute to the safety and health of our communities. Neighborhood and nonprofit organizations are also part of the public health partnership.

## **The Main Functions of a Public Health System**

While the structure of the public health system varies greatly from state to state, experts have identified the following **core functions of an effective public health system**.

1. **Preventing Diseases** – Controlling and preventing disease – from infectious diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis, and Influenza, to chronic diseases such as diabetes and arthritis – are the major concerns of the Oneida County Health Department.
2. **Protecting Against Environmental Hazard** – Environmental health hazards- materials such as mercury, pesticides, air and water pollutants and lead can have a significant effect on the health of our population as a whole, but are often undetected. Another goal of public health is to minimize the public’s exposure to such environmental hazards. The Oneida County Health Department’s work on environmental issues can include:
  - Addressing hazardous air pollutants
  - Protecting from exposure to asbestos and other toxins
  - Assessing risk from chemicals
  - Providing fluoridation services

- Managing hazardous materials
  - Screening and investigating lead exposure
  - Establishing radon programs
  - Managing solid and toxic waste
  - Controlling water quality
  - Food Safety and Security – preventing food borne illness
  - Residential and Recreational Safety – preventing injury in the home and recreational sites
- 3. Preventing Injuries** – Public Health agencies implement strategies that can prevent many kinds of injuries. Safety and injury education programs cover a variety of injuries from motor vehicle crashes and agricultural accidents to violence and suicide prevention. Examples of other activities include residential smoke detectors installation programs and campaigns to improve seat belt use.
- 4. Promoting and Encouraging Healthy Behaviors** – The Oneida County Health Department educates the community on health and disease prevention such as physical fitness, nutrition and early detection of cancer. The health department analyzes which chronic disease risks are most common in their communities and then initiate activity to increase awareness and understanding of preventative measures, frequently working with the private sector, associations, and community groups to promote and provide education about healthy behaviors.
- 5. Responding to Disasters and Assisting Communities in Recovery** – The Oneida County Health Department is involved in protecting the community from immediate and long-term effects of natural and man-made disasters. The health department works with emergency management organizations to identify, respond to and mitigate natural disasters and threats of bioterrorism.
- 6. Ensuring the Quality and Accessibility of Health Services** – The Oneida County Health Department (OCHD) evaluates medical capacities of the community including quality of and accessibility to health services. Ensuring access sometimes involves providing actual services to people who lack insurance or cannot access private providers for services such as immunizations. Ensuring access can also involve coordinating among agencies to develop programs and establish referral sources.

## **How the Public Health System is Structured**

The “public health system” represents a wide collection of entities that collaborate and depend on one another. The structure of the public health system- **whose work is carried out by public health departments and agencies** – varies across the country by state.

Public health in Oneida County is the province of the Oneida County Health Department (OCHD) working in conjunction and cooperation with the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH).

## **Elected Officials and Public Health**

Many public health problems – such as infectious diseases on a pandemic scale- require a national solution. Federal officials play a large role in public health by developing policies, setting standards, administering funds appropriated by Congress, conducting research and providing technical assistance.

State legislators pass laws that shape public health activities, fund programs and ensure that health agencies are accountable. A recent example of how legislation can impact public health is the establishment of the Clean Indoor Air Act. Other examples would be school immunization requirements, laws on reporting communicable diseases and restricting the sale of tobacco products to minors.

At the local level, elected officials play a critical role in public health as well because the laws, regulations and ordinances they create help to make the community a healthier place. As leaders in the community, elected officials also help communicate important public health messages to the citizens they serve.

Local governments, including counties and cities, conduct most public health work because they are closer to the people they serve. At the local level, police powers enable the government to preserve and promote public health even if it means limiting personal freedoms for the good of the community. Examples of such requirements include mandatory vaccination and screening for tuberculosis and enforcement of quarantine and isolation procedures, as well as inspections, licenses and environmental zoning restrictions in the private sector.

## **Special Roles for City Officials: Preparing for Health Emergencies**

In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, subsequent anthrax events in Fall 2001, the SARS outbreak, and the threat of pandemic Influenza, the role for local leaders in promoting public health has broadened and intensified.

Following are basic steps local elected officials must take in helping prepare their community for the types of public health emergencies that threaten hometown security.

- **Know how your community is served by the public health system.** It is imperative that you build a relationship with the Director of the public health agency. It is imperative that you learn about its capacity, and limitations.
- Make sure **your local emergency response plan includes the public health agency.**
- Have **planning for bio-terrorism combined with planning for other public health emergencies such as pandemic Influenza.** All emergency response plans should include plans for managing infectious disease outbreaks.

- Ensure that **law enforcement and the court system participate** in planning efforts since a bio-terrorism act involves criminal activity and pandemics may involve enforcement of quarantines.
- **Become familiar with state laws and medical ordinances relating to quarantine/isolation** and regulations restricting movement of people exposed to communicable diseases.
- **Ensure that the local health care and emergency response community is trained in identifying bio-terrorist attacks and agents** and is familiar with the signs of infectious diseases and illnesses likely to result from those agents. Training of local personnel must include protocols for reporting unusual illnesses to the health department.
- **Evaluate regional approaches for the future.** The increased urgency for public health preparedness planning is causing local governments to take a regional approach to be more effective. Examine how your system works on a regional basis and consider the potential for more shared services and resources.