

ENVIRONMENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH TRACKING ASTHO FELLOWSHIP REPORT

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Submitted to

Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
Environmental Public Health Tracking: State-to-State Peer Fellowship Program
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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2011, the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) was made aware of Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) Environmental Public Health Tracking: State-to-State Fellowship Program. ADPH applied for the Fellowship in December 2011, and it was awarded on February 7, 2012.

The mission of ADPH Epidemiology Division (EPI) is to protect the residents of Alabama by monitoring and responding to cases of communicable, zoonotic, and environmentally-related human diseases. The Fellowship gave EPI an opportunity to learn from a state that has implemented the Environmental Public Health Tracking (EPHT) program was very appealing. ADPH recognizes that developing an EPHT portal would greatly increase our ability to address our residents and visitors concerns regarding air and water quality, as well as other environmental factors.

REPORT ON TRACKING ACTIVITIES

I. National Environmental Public Health Tracking Meeting

This year's CDC Environment Public Health Tracking Workshop, held April 30 – May 3, 2012, in Denver, Colorado, was the first opportunity ADPH has had to attend. ADPH received the CDC EPHT Program materials prior to the meeting and had reviewed them, but the attendee was pleasantly surprised by the number of sessions and amount of information that would be presented.

The sessions were broken up into three topical areas, each representing content workgroup (CWG), standards and network development workgroup (SND), and program marketing and outreach workgroup (PMO). As there was only one Fellow from ADPH at the meeting, he decided to attend at least one session from each group in an effort to familiarize with each working group. The material covered in each session was very informative. The atmosphere in each session was relaxed, and lead to many instructive question and answer periods. The session Chairs were enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and keep the sessions on track and on time. The conference facilities were excellent. Overall, the experience was first rate.

II. Visit Host State

Summary

From April 1-4, 2012, the Fellow visited the state of South Carolina, which has implemented the EPHT program. ADPH currently has a good working relationship with the state of South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC). ADPH had reviewed DHEC EPHT portal prior to the visit and was greatly interested in how DHEC had developed and implemented their portal. The overall impression of the DHEC Program was very favorable.

Accomplishments

The Fellow visited South Carolina from April 1-4, 2012. The visit was well planned by DHEC and Ify Mordi of ASTHO. All aspects of the EPHT program were presented and discussed with the ADPH Fellow. Fran W. Marshall, J.D., M.S.P.H., State Toxicologist, welcomed the Fellow and introduced him to the other members of the EPHT program staff. On the first day, the following topics were covered by either Fran or a member of the program staff:

Overview of EPHT in South Carolina
Network Organization
Messaging and Program Marketing Outreach
Building Partnerships

The second day covered:

Assessing Data Systems for Tracking
EPHT Information Technology
Web Portal Demonstration
Wrap Up Q&A

Learning Experience

The material presented and expertises of DHEC EPHT Program staff were outstanding. The South Carolina Program is well developed, and contains a large amount of information. At several points in the visit, challenges and solutions were discussed in context of portal development and data use/sharing. These discussions were of great value. It was also evident that different skill sets, in the form of database management, programming, and marketing are required to bring the portal online and maintain it.

Application

The implementation of an EPHT portal by ADPH will be a challenge. Unlike South Carolina, ADPH is not integrated with its environmental monitoring and regulatory agency. Those functions are managed by the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM). While ADPH and ADEM have an excellent working relationship, it will take time to craft data sharing agreements and establish databases that provide the required information but protect personal information. Informal discussions of the EPHT Program have taken place, and the potential partner agencies are interested in learning more. ADPH has shared the information gathered at the host state and national meeting with these groups.

III. Small Project

Project Summary

The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill was a tragic event that affected four states and hundreds of thousands of people on the northern Gulf of Mexico. Residents and visitors to our coastal region were deeply concerned and very interested in the current environmental conditions and how contaminants could affect their short and long term health. ADPH did maintain a section of its website for information pertaining to the oil spill, but it did not have air or water data to accompany it. On March 7, 2012, we developed and launched a Coastal Conditions Webpage that drew from federal, state, and local sources of data.

Specific Aims

The goal of the project was to establish a Webpage that could be used by residents and visitors to obtain up-to-date information on coastal conditions.

Benefits and Significance to Alabama and EPHTN

The initial benefit of the Webpage has been to link data sources from the different agencies into one page that make it easier for residents and visitors to access. We expect to use user feedback to better organize the materials and data for additional ease of use.

Methods/Key Personnel

This project was performed in collaboration with the ADPH Division of Epidemiology (EPI), ADPH Graphic Design, Marine Resources Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and the Air and Water Divisions of ADEM. After reviewing the DHEC coastal website, the EPI personnel finalized the content and contacted members of the graphics department design our page graphic. Once the graphic was approved, the EPI team began to add the data links to the webpage. In addition to state air, water, and coastal data, the EPI team added air data derived from the US EPA and NOAA sources. These were data that are not currently captured by state agencies, such as pollen counts and weather. Additional water conditions such as tidal conditions were added from NOAA and local sources (the municipalities of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, AL). The EPI division implemented the webpage in March of 2012.

Results

As of 5/18/12, the Coastal Conditions Webpage has had 776 visitors. Based on informal feedback from the local municipalities and state agencies involved, the Webpage was well received. We are in the process of determining what additional data or resources we can add to make the Webpage more useful.

Discussion

The Webpage is an initial attempt to begin integrating existing federal and state environmental data with data captured by EPI personnel. As this data is routinely collected and posted, maintaining these data on the website is not an issue. As is, the webpage can be maintained with little effort. However, after viewing the CDC EPHT portal and other state portals, ADPH is interested in developing the drop down menu capabilities as well as mapping/GIS functions. However, ADPH is currently limited to a minimalist approach to its Website. ADPH's Website information must be able to be accessed by the slowest internet connection. After consulting with the IT manager for DHEC, there may be a way to expand our capability, but will require further discussion with ADPH IT managers and the State Health Officer and the Assistant State Health Officers. The portal can also be used to make data available to county health department personnel via a secure portal.

IV. PLANNED ACTIVITIES

Currently, our future goals are to maintain the Coastal Conditions Webpage, and continue to add content. We will consult with our IT managers and Website developers to determine how to add drop down menus and searchable database capabilities. We expect to consult with our peer state and other regional states that have implemented the EPHT Program, such as Florida and Louisiana. We have good working relationships with these states, and they have expressed willingness to assist us. We will also apply for CDC EPHT grant opportunities, when they are available.

V. CONCLUSION

The participation of ADPH in the ASTHO EPHT State-to-State Peer Fellowship program has been of great benefit, and we are grateful of the chance to participate. The EPHT Program is an excellent way to present data of interest to the public and speed up information requests from Alabama residents.

VI. REFERENCES

The ADPH Coastal Conditions webpage:

<http://www.adph.org/epi/index.asp?id=5622>