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STATEMENT OF POLICY

Evidence-Informed Public Health

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) supports evidence-informed decision-making in public health practice. Evidence-informed decision-making takes evidence-based practice a step further by incorporating research evidence “along with expertise, existing public health resources... the local context and community, and the political climate.”¹ This approach also requires active partnership with and engagement of communities; understanding of community strengths, needs and priorities; and the application of an equity lens when selecting, using and interpreting data and context. It allows for different levels or tiers of evidence, such as promising practices or promising evidence, i.e., not yet subject to peer review,² to be taken into consideration, if deemed appropriate.

NACCHO recommends the following for local health departments:

- *Use data and information systematically in support of and according to agreed-upon logic model(s) and theory of change.*

Local Health Departments (LHD) should promote utilization of public health surveillance: the ongoing systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of specific health data, closely integrated with the timely dissemination of these data to those responsible for preventing and controlling disease or injury. When considering a health or policy issue, LHDs should review scientific literature for evidenced-informed practices and identify which interventions would be the most appropriate to use in addressing health or policy issues before implementation. Evidence should be evaluated using appropriate analytical tools and methods to determine the effectiveness and feasibility of population-based interventions. Implementation of these evidence-informed interventions should be planned in advance, grounded in relevant public health theory, and monitored over time. LHDs should evaluate efforts to determine effectiveness, using a “systematic process to understand what a program does and how well the program does it.”³ Including evaluation as part of the planning process helps clarify program goals and establish reasonable outcomes.⁴ LHDs should conduct evaluations to determine effectiveness and impact of a strategy, keeping in line with logic models and theory of change. Local health departments will conduct these activities in alignment with ethical use of public health data and best practices to protect the privacy and integrity of the data.

- *Make decisions based on the best available evidence.*



Decision-making occurs at the intersection of resources, population characteristics, and best available evidence all within a particular environment.⁵ LHDs should inventory available evidence related to a driving question or potential intervention. In public health, generally the broadest reaching data can be found in a systematic review. Systematic reviews should include a variety of valid data sources (e.g., research, surveillance) and types (e.g., quantitative, qualitative). Absent a relevant systematic review, then LHDs should consult the best available evidence in a tiered approach: primary studies, then indirect evidence, and finally anecdotal or tacit knowledge.⁶ Approaches such as Health in All Policies (HiAP) and Health Impact Assessments (HIA) provide strategies to use data to inform the decision-making process at a policy level. These approaches facilitate the incorporation of multiple viewpoints, variables and contexts into findings to the decision-making process.⁷ When evidence is unavailable, LHDs should review their extant knowledge of best practices; their relevant prior experiences; and their current policies, plans, and procedures. They may then employ critical thinking to adapt available knowledge and resources to support decision-making in novel contexts. When responding to urgent and emergent public health threats, LHD's must balance rigorous exploration of available evidence with the critical importance of making decisions in a timely fashion. Where feasible, LHDs should support the field by subsequently generating evidence and conducting research and evaluations of the highest quality possible and with effective data governance and disseminating their findings. LHDs should develop the core public health competencies among their workforce to ensure the skills and capacities to engage in this work.⁸

- *Adapt to local needs, evaluate efforts and share with others*

Access to quality information supports LHDs in making decisions based on the best available evidence. However, LHDs must ensure that they incorporate and adapt to local needs to be successful. LHDs should leverage foundational public health reports such as the Community Health Assessments (CHA) / Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNA) to inform local public health priorities and design evidence-informed strategies to address the identified issues. Through these reports or via other evidence-informed pathways, LHDs should seek participatory approaches that actively involve community members in public health research and community health improvement. As the decision-making process incorporates local strengths and needs, the results and findings of the implemented approaches are unique. As LHDs implement strategies, the impacts—both successful and unsuccessful—should be shared with others using evidence-informed communication practices. Taking this last and vital step informs on, advocates for, and defends policies, programs, and resources that improve health in the community. LHDs should foster an organizational culture that incorporates evidence in decision-making, ensuring staff are able to develop, implement and communicate about the incorporation of evidence into the decision-making process.⁹

Justification

Public health seeks to improve the health of populations. To do this, it must build and maintain public trust and act to promote health and protect all people in all communities against threats to health and well-being. In an increasingly complex world, it is imperative that public health maintains rigor when determining what actions to take. Information and data are at the core of this process. By adhering to the principles of evidence-informed decision-making, public health is most effective in improving health while competently building and maintaining trust among communities. These values have long been espoused and supported by leading public health organizations.

Evidence-informed decision-making has become a widely established standard and norm within public health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization have multiple resources that provide guidance and support to public health professions in adopting and practicing this key tenet of public health. Evidence-informed decision-making guides major public health efforts, including Healthy People 2030 and County Health Rankings.^{10, 11} It has also become an expectation of Local Health Departments who seek national accreditation through the Public Health Accreditation Board. Demonstrating evidence-informed practice in community health enhances LHDs' pursuit of becoming fully accredited.

The foundation for evidence-informed public health practice is a combination of multidisciplinary empirical research and evaluation evidence, active community involvement, accumulated public health practice, and other local considerations.¹² The knowledge gleaned from this evidence base is used to develop policies and practices that improve health outcomes and performance as well as allowing for more efficient use of resources. Local Health Departments will face public health threats, issues, and challenges for which there is no clear path, limited or no empirical evidence, or for which efforts to leverage extant best practices have been unsuccessful due to local circumstances. Using the foundations of evidence-informed decision-making, Local Health Departments can push the field of practice forward by continuing to evolve and innovate. Through diligent pursuit of available data and information, applied within an established framework, and taking local circumstance, thoughts and needs into account, LHDs can effect change to improve population health. When this is coupled with quality evaluation and dissemination among peers, the volume of evidence can grow and support the public health efforts of tomorrow.

References

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