

## **Health Department Reflects on 2008, Looks Ahead to 2009**

Having wrapped-up what has been a most eventful Calendar Year 2008, I would like to take this opportunity to revisit the past 12 months of public health activities and challenges in our county—along with persisting budget concerns at the Health Department that will result in some significant changes to our programs and services for 2009, which I'll address shortly.

Just as our community continued to grow during 2008, so did disease threats and related requests for Health Department interventions. From unprecedented numbers of infectious outbreaks to rising concerns over food- and water-borne illnesses, the Health Department has been heavily utilized in terms of inspections, investigations and even some closures of public facilities for the protection of our citizens.

### **2008 by the Numbers**

There's a saying that "a picture is worth a thousand words." From a public health perspective, data is even more telling because it prominently illustrates disease trends and other health-focused issues placing our community at risk. Following, are some of the more compelling public health statistics for El Paso County during 2008:

- Reported hospitalized flu cases in El Paso County during the 2007-08 Flu Season were nearly 400% higher than the previous year and represented the highest number of reported cases statewide.
- Child care center violation rates per inspection have doubled since 2005.
- El Paso County reported a higher number of foodborne illness outbreaks than any other county in Colorado.
- Through November, the Health Department managed a total of 39 disease outbreaks—representing nearly a 100% increase from 2007.
- Infectious Tuberculosis cases increased, resulting in the 3rd highest number of reported cases statewide.
- The Health Department had to close 70 pools and spas due to safety or health concerns.

### **Health Department Reorganization in 2009**

In contrast to our county's increasing public health threats, the Health Department has suffered substantial funding cuts and staffing reductions, dating back to 2002. Since that time, the Health Department has lost nearly \$2.3 million (45%) of its county per-capita (per-person) funding, faced deficit spending totaling \$2.7 million and, consequently, reduced its staff by 30%. The Health Department's current local per-capita (per-person) funding stands at \$4.63—less than half the average per-capita support for public health agencies serving the state's most populated counties—El Paso County being the largest in population.

Heading into 2009, the Health Department will be staffed with fewer than 180 FTEs, about half the national average for public health agencies serving populations of 500,000-plus. The Health Department's funding and staffing reductions have plummeted to a point where drastic measures must be taken in order to achieve a balanced budget and sustain basic public health protections for our citizens in the upcoming year. Consequently and regrettably, the following public health services will be reduced, suspended or eliminated (as indicated) for 2009:

- **Air Quality:** Monitoring indexes, facility inspections, new construction planning—**eliminated.**
- **Water Quality:** Rural, non-municipal ground water system inspections (e.g., rural schools, restaurants, child care centers, grocery stores, and churches)—**eliminated.** Swimming pool/spa inspections and regulation enforcement—**eliminated.**
- **Solid Waste Management:** Response to complaints regarding household trash, animal waste and foreclosed property health hazards—**eliminated.**
- **Vector/Zoonoses:** West Nile virus surveillance, reporting and testing—**eliminated.** Surveillance and testing of rodents for plague—**eliminated.** Hantavirus and rabies investigations and testing—**limited to reported human infections.**
- **School Safety Education and Regulation Enforcement:** Sanitation, science rooms, chemical storage and general safety—**eliminated.**
- **Child Care Inspections:** Sanitation and facility safety compliance—**eliminated.** Complaint follow-ups—**limited to high-risk diseases or outbreaks.**
- **STD Surveillance and Investigations:** Local health department investigation of reported infections and contacts—**eliminated.**
- **Temporary Event Food Vendor Inspections:** Planning, training and regulating—**suspended.**
- **New Operating Days/Hours:** Effective January 5, 2009, the Health Department will be open Monday—Thursday (closed Fridays), with extended operating hours from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.

### **Looking Ahead**

The impact of these program and service reductions on both the general public and hundreds of local organizations will be significant. In spite of the Health Department’s restructuring in 2009, however, we remain resolute in our mission: *“To protect and promote public health and environmental quality in our community through people, prevention and partnerships.”* The “prevention” aspect of our mission undoubtedly will be more challenging in the face of dwindling Department dollars, workforce and dedicated services. That is why we so greatly value our continued professional and community-based partnerships. Together we can help ensure a healthier and safer community in this New Year.

Please visit our website at [www.elpasocountyhealth.org](http://www.elpasocountyhealth.org) to learn more about the Health Department’s reorganization and related challenges in 2009.

**Source: Colorado Springs Business Journal Health Quarterly, December 2008**