

## **Health Department Budget Cuts Reduce Protection for Community**

El Paso County's widening budget crisis has implications for all local residents—individuals and families, as well as businesses, are increasingly at risk for the spread of disease and exposure to environmental threats. As deputy public health administrator, I have a duty to tell you that your protection from these threats—the responsibility of the El Paso County Department of Health and Environment—is in jeopardy. We have the most populous county, yet our Health Department is the lowest county funded, per capita (per resident) of the state's top 10 counties.

**Local funding for Health Department:** El Paso County had to make \$9.1 million in midyear cuts to balance its 2008 budget, and that translated to a \$507,000 cut from the Health Department's budget. The Health Department now operates on a local budget that is nearly \$1.8 million (35%) less than in 2001. Meanwhile, El Paso County grew by more than 64,000 people between 2001 and 2007 and is headed for more population increases in 2008. So even more residents are at increased risk for a host of infectious diseases, food-borne illness and air and water quality concerns. The county's investment in providing core public health protection to residents is about \$5.35 per resident per year, which is practically half the amount we received in 2001 and less than other health departments in Colorado receive. The Pueblo City-County Health Department, for example, receives nearly \$12 per resident from its county.

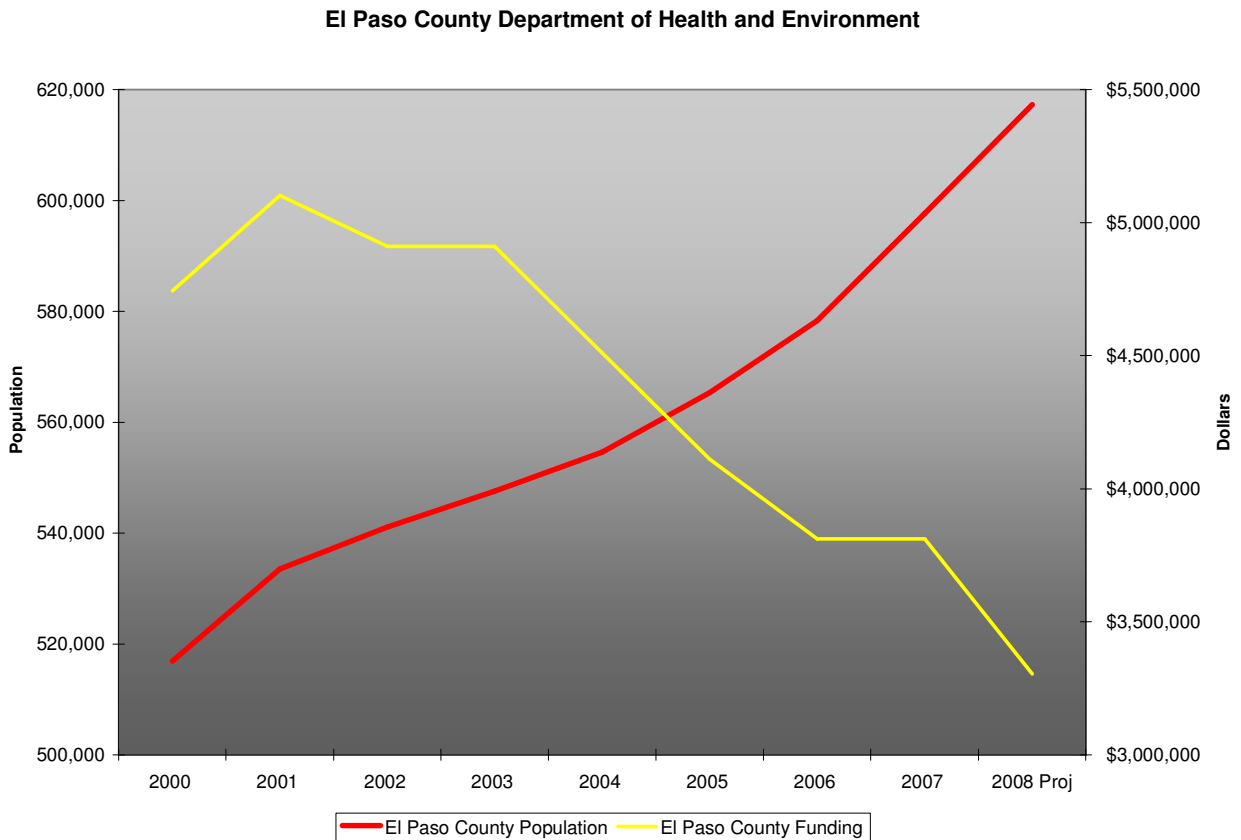
**Already cut to the bone:** In response to past budget cuts, the Health Department already has eliminated a number of public health programs or transitioned these programs into the private or non-profit sectors. Examples include elimination of prenatal care, well-child checkups, and drug and alcohol prevention, education, and counseling. The Health Department has fewer employees today—42 fewer—than it did in 2001, due to layoffs and reductions by attrition. By necessity, the Health Department's leadership continues to pare down even its core public health protection, reducing public protection through routine and complaint-driven inspections of retail food establishments, child care centers and public pools/spas. Also scaled back are investigation, prevention and management of infectious diseases.

**Less public health protection:** As a result of the 2008 midyear budget cuts, the community is at increased risk for:

- **Contracting infectious disease** because the Health Department will lose two epidemiologist positions—these are the public health professionals who serve as “disease detectives” to monitor disease trends and to investigate and prevent the spread of disease in El Paso County. This comes against the backdrop of increasing cases of infectious disease. Nearly one in 10 state-reported diseases comes from our county. For example, we are seeing a significant spike in diseases such as infectious tuberculosis and whooping cough. But disease investigations require considerable resources and time, and we're running out of both.

- **Spread of blood-borne disease, such as HIV and hepatitis**, because the Health Department will no longer be able to inspect and regulate body art facilities. Body art such as tattoos are increasingly popular in today's society, and the potential for blood-borne illness crosses all age and socioeconomic boundaries.
- **Exposure to harmful chemicals** such as those involved with illegal manufacture of methamphetamine, because the Health Department will no longer be able to oversee cleanups of homes used as illegal meth labs. Lack of this protection could put individuals and families at health risk and threaten property values.

**The bottom line:** Twenty-three percent of the Health Department's funding comes from El Paso County—and that is not enough to pay for the core public health protection that citizens require. As county funding continues to shrink, the Health Department will have to cut back further on public health protection, and our community will be at increasing risk. This is an urgent problem, and I will update you periodically.



**Source: The New Falcon Herald, June 2008**