

State-Local Health and Medical Preparedness Initiative: A Look at West Virginia's Preparedness Collaborative

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After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, public health and medical entities soon became engaged in activities in order to be better prepared to restore critical services and respond to large scale incidents (both natural and manmade) that impact the public's health and well-being.

At the state level, the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health's Center for Threat Preparedness (CTP) partners with local health departments, hospitals, primary care centers to develop plans and response capability, acquire training and equipment, enhance public information processes and participate in disaster exercises. Each county in West Virginia has entities that have worked tirelessly to develop a standard of preparedness in order to better protect the health of their citizens and themselves in floods, environmental accidents, derechos, hurricanes, pandemics, etc.

Every local health department and medical facility in your community is loaded with unsung heroes who need your support. Unbeknownst to most of the public and county leadership, much of their preparation and actual response activity is done behind the scenes, usually long before the warning sounds.

Here are just a few of the examples of the work that they are prepared to manage 24/7, 365 days a year:

- Enhanced clinical services
- Expeditious public health sanitation services
- Emergency mass pharmaceutical dispensing
- Support with emergency sheltering
- Public information releases and media releases
- Partnering with other emergency responders
- Disease outbreak investigation and mitigation
- Emergency communication

For years, federal funding has been provided to local entities to support preparedness activities. But these funds are diminishing rapidly with no replacement in sight. Unfortunately, there is a real chance that these local organizations will not be able to maintain that standard of preparedness for the public that they have

worked so hard to achieve.

So, what can county leaders do to help? The easy answer, but difficult solution is to augment this lost funding with local fiscal resources.

Realizing the apparent limitations on available funding at community levels, there are other opportunities worth considering:

- One possibility is for the county leadership to become active members in collaborative preparedness committees that health departments and medical entities participate in and decide how best your community's unique civic talents/resources fit into preparedness plans and response activities.
- Another possibility would be to promote the preparedness activities in other civic arenas to stir local volunteer support. Each local health department has a health and medical volunteer response team that could use additional members.

County leadership has a moral responsibility and unique opportunity to support the preparedness initiative that exists in their community. To put a spin on an old saying, we can only be as successfully prepared as our weakest link.

A statewide preparedness initiative takes collaboration and partnerships on all levels, across the board. It can't be centered or focused on only one aspect or on only one resource. But together, we can all be prepared and come out on top when these situations arise.

