

**PROMOTING
AND
PROTECTING
HEALTHY COMMUNITIES**

An Elected Officials Guide to Public Health

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Dear Elected Official:

Government has always worked on behalf of the citizenry to protect the health of the public. As elected officials, we hold this responsibility paramount among our duties.


In order for us to better promote and protect the health of those we serve, we must first understand the workings of our community's public health system, as well as the role we play in that system.

The 21st century has brought challenges and threats to public health that we could not have conceived when Oneida County first established its Health Department. The present-day threats of deadly pandemics, man-made disasters and possible terrorist activities strain the limits of our public health system and tax our resources like never before.

These challenges can best be met through broad-based partnerships and regional collaborations that will allow us to maximize our resources and minimize the waste that would otherwise result from redundant programs and duplicative efforts.

The information in *An Elected Officials Guide to Public Health* is presented here to better acquaint you with our public health system and help define your role as an advocate for the most effective health services.

Respectfully,


Anthony J. Picente, Jr.
Oneida County Executive

What Is Public Health?

Public Health has been defined by some experts as “an organized community effort aimed at the prevention of disease and the promotion of health.” Unlike our *health care* system, which provides services to individual citizens, *public health* focuses on the *population as a whole*. At the local level, Oneida County public health is about promoting a healthy community.

Public health affects all of us, all of the time. Public health efforts have increased our life span by nearly twenty years in the past century. Today people live longer because public health activities have helped us recognize the effect and reduce the spread of infectious diseases that once cut life short for the entire population. Public health efforts also teach us to modify unhealthy behaviors that place us at risk for disease and premature death.

Everyday activities we take for granted like drinking clean water, breathing clean air, eating a balanced diet, and wearing seat restraints while driving are benefits that we owe the public health system that is dedicated to making good health available to us.

Oneida County’s public health system involves many players including the Oneida County Health Department (OCHD) which has the responsibility of ensuring public health and employing professionals such as physicians, epidemiologists, social workers, nurses and environmental health specialists. The Oneida Health Department relies on medical professionals in the private sector to perform health functions and help patients practice prevention. Police and fire departments play a crucial role in ensuring public safety and well-being. Architects, developers, city planners, and traffic design specialists contribute to the safety and health of our communities. Neighborhood and nonprofit organizations are also a part of the public health partnership.

The Main Functions of Public Health

While the structure of the public health system varies greatly from state to state, experts have identified the following **core functions of an effective public health system**.

1. **Preventing Diseases** – Controlling and preventing disease - from infectious disease such as HIV, tuberculosis, and influenza, to chronic diseases such as diabetes and arthritis – are the major concerns of the Oneida County Health Department.

- 2. Protecting Against Environmental Hazard** – Environmental health hazards – materials such as mercury, pesticides, air and water pollutants and lead can have significant effects on the health of our population as a whole, but are often undetected. Another goal of public health is to minimize the public’s exposure to such environmental hazard’s. The Oneida County Health Department’s work on environmental issues include:
- Screening and investigating lead exposure
 - Protecting from exposure to asbestos and other toxins
 - Assessing risk from chemicals
 - Addressing hazardous air pollutants
 - Establishing radon programs
 - Food Safety and Security
 - Residential and recreational safety – preventing injury in the home and recreational sites
 - Controlling water quality
- 3. Preventing Injuries** – Public health agencies implement strategies that can prevent many kinds of injuries. Safety and education programs cover a variety of injuries from motor vehicle accidents and agricultural accidents to violence and suicide prevention. Examples of other activities include residential smoke detector installation programs and campaigns to improve seat belt use.
- 4. Promoting and Encouraging Healthy Behaviors** - The Oneida County Health Department educates the community on health and disease prevention such as physical fitness, nutrition and early detection of cancer. The OCHD analyzes which chronic diseases are most common in our community and then initiates activities to increase awareness and understanding of preventative measures, frequently working with the private sector, associations, and community groups to promote and provide education about healthy behaviors.
- 5. Responding to Disasters and Assisting The Community in Recovery** – The OCHD is involved in protecting the community from immediate and long-term effects of natural and man-made disasters. The health department works with emergency management organizations to identify, respond to and mitigate natural disasters and threats of bio-terrorism.

6. Ensuring the Quality and Accessibility of Health Services – The Oneida

County Health Department evaluates the medical capacities within the community including quality and accessibility to health services. Ensuring access sometime involves providing actual services to the uninsured or those who cannot access private providers for services such as immunizations. Ensuring access can also involve coordinating among agencies to develop programs and establish referral sources.

How the Public Health System is Structured

The public health system represents a wide collection of entities that collaborate and depend on one another. The structure of the public health system **whose work is carried out by the public health departments and agencies** varies across the country by state.

Public Health in Oneida County is the province of the Oneida County Health Department (OCHD) working in conjunction and cooperation with the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH).

Elected Officials and Public Health

Many public health problems such as infectious diseases on a pandemic scale require a national solution. Federal officials play a large role in public health by developing policies, setting standards, administering funds appropriated by Congress, conducting research and providing technical assistance.

State legislators pass laws that shape public health activities, fund programs and ensure that health agencies are accountable. A recent example of how legislation can impact public health is the enactment of the Clean Indoor Air Act. Other examples would be school immunization requirements, laws on reporting communicable diseases and restricting the sale of tobacco products to minors.

At the local level, elected officials play a critical role in public health as well because the laws, regulations and ordinances they create help make the community a healthier place. As community leaders, elected officials also help communicate important health messages to their constituents.

Local governments conduct most public health work because they are closer to the people they serve. At the local level, police powers enable government to preserve and promote public health even if it means limiting personal freedoms for the good of the community. Examples of such restrictions would include mandatory vaccinations and screening for tuberculosis and enforcement of quarantine and isolation procedures, as well as inspections, licenses and environmental zoning restrictions in the private sector.

Special Roles for City Officials: Preparing for Health Emergencies

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, subsequent anthrax events in the Fall of 2001, the SARS outbreak, and the threat of pandemic influenza, the role for local leaders in promoting public health has broadened and intensified.

In order to help prepare their community for the type of public health emergencies that threaten hometown security, elected officials should:

- **Know how your community is served by the public health system.** It is imperative that you build a relationship with the Director of the public health agency. It is also imperative that elected officials learn the capacity of the agency and its limitations.
- **Make sure your local emergency response plan includes the public health department.**
- **Have planning for bioterrorism combined with planning for other public health emergencies such as pandemic influenza.** All emergency response plans should include plans for managing infectious disease outbreaks.
- **Ensure that law enforcement and the court system participate** in planning efforts since a bioterrorism act involves criminal activity and pandemics may involve the enforcement of quarantines.
- **Become familiar with state laws and medical ordinances relating to quarantine/isolation** and regulations restricting movement of people exposed to communicable diseases.
- **Ensure that the local health agency and the emergency response community is trained in identifying bioterrorist attacks and agents** and is familiar with the signs of infectious diseases and illnesses likely to result from those agents. Training of local personnel must include protocols for reporting unusual illnesses to the health department.

- **Evaluate regional approaches for the future.** The increased urgency for public health preparedness planning is causing local governments to take a regional approach to be more effective. Examine how your system works on a regional basis and consider the potential for more shared services and resources.