



HealthVoices

Together We Can Do Better: Creating a 21st Century Public Health System for Georgians

Issue 1, 2010

Whether there is an outbreak of influenza, an act of bioterrorism, a widespread food borne illnesses or an obesity epidemic, Georgians should expect the state to be prepared to prevent, detect and contain a significant public health threat. Further, we should assume a public health safety net is in place to address air and water contamination issues that force the closure of schools and businesses, or to provide for the need for prenatal care in a community in which the infant mortality rate rivals that of a developing Third World country. If this protective safety net is not in place, then what are the health and economic consequences for each Georgian and the communities in which they reside?

This issue of HealthVoices examines current trends that suggest Georgia is at significant risk of failing to honor its time-honored commitment to public health.

What is Public Health?

Public Health is the system that ensures the conditions are optimal for Georgians to be healthy. Established in 1875, Georgia's public health system represents the state's commitment to preventing epidemics and the spread of disease, protecting against environmental hazards, avoiding injuries, encouraging healthy behaviors and ensuring the quality and accessibility of health services.¹

The Division of Public Health is the "lead agency entrusted by the people of the State of Georgia with the ultimate responsibility for the health of communities and the entire population."

Over the years, the public health system has evolved into a state-run system comprising 18 health districts and 159 county health departments. The state's highest ranking public health official is the state health officer, who is appointed by the Governor. In addition to the state system, Georgia's public health assets include academic schools and programs in public health and the Georgia Public Health Association, a nonprofit corporation organized to promote the public and personal health of the citizens of Georgia.

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What is Georgia's commitment to Public Health?

Georgia's current investments in prevention and public health reflect a decade of declines, despite being the ninth largest state in economic output. Since 2000, Georgia's population has increased 20 percent, yet per capita spending for the public health system decreased 21 percent. Cuts have resulted in diminished capacity in areas including, but not limited to: epidemiology, prenatal care, control of sexually transmitted diseases, school nursing and the management of conditions such as asthma, laboratory services and emergency preparedness. Georgia's current allocation to public health is approximately 4 cents a day per person, or approximately \$20 per person per year. The state's FY2011 budget for the Division of Public Health is \$148.9 million, a decrease of approximately \$10 million.

The spiraling costs of poor health outcomes may reflect, in part, Georgia's fiscal and technical capacity to promote and protect the health of its citizens. Current estimates show that 1,000 of 7,500 public health positions are vacant and/or at risk of being eliminated. The nursing workforce shrank 22 percent, from 1,817 in 2002 to 1,423 in 2010. Environmental health specialists who inspect restaurants and drinking water, and who respond to environmental hazards have experienced a 20 percent decrease in staff positions. In addition, much of the public health workforce is employed at below market wages, and

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some employees are forced to hold two jobs or seek public assistance.

Public Health in Georgia: The consequences of neglect.

During the past decade, Georgia has found itself among the bottom 10 states on critical measures of health. Currently, Georgia ranks 43rd among states on indicators ranging from mortality, morbidity, personal health behaviors, access to health care and allocation of financial resources to promote and protect the health of its citizens.²

Georgia's State Health Rankings³

Indicator	Ranking
Adults with Diabetes	41
Infant Mortality	40
Pre-term Births	43
Prevalence of Infectious Disease	47
Obese Children	49
Overall	43

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer,

stroke and diabetes are responsible for 7 of 10 deaths each year and account for 75 percent of the nation's health spending.⁴ Many of these deaths are premature and preventable; many of the costs are avoidable. There is good news, though. Clear and compelling evidence shows that investing in public health saves lives and money. However, Georgia's current investments in prevention and public health are well below the threshold to achieve significant health benefits and cost savings.

Does a compromised Public Health system matter?

A 2009 Trust for America's Health poll⁵ shows strong support for public health among Americans:

- 71% favor an increased investment in disease prevention;
- 70% think prevention will save money rather than cost money;
- 82% favor ensuring that public health workers are well trained and adequately equipped;
- 72% favor a proposal to establish a Public Health Investment Fund that would dedicate annual funding to prevention.

Despite the many contributions of public health (often invisible to the public), it is the health crisis of the day that generates strong public support.



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Reversing the trend: Autonomy, authority, resources, leadership and workforce capacity.

At Healthcare Georgia Foundation, we believe the path to creating a 21st century public health system—one that saves lives and saves money—begins with:

- **Autonomy**—At the state level, public health has resided in the Department of Human Resources and is now in the Department of Community Health. To ensure that public health is appropriately positioned, it is important that it receive the proper amount of legislative attention, funding and oversight, with as much autonomy as possible.
- **Authority**—Public health must have the authority to act swiftly and decisively so resources may be mobilized to prevent, detect and contain a health crisis. The ability at the state or local level to mobilize the public health workforce, partner with the private sector or access federal resources in times of crisis should not be bureaucratically burdened. This too, is best accomplished by positioning public health within state government with as much autonomy as possible.
- **Resources**—Significant declines in funding pose a direct and harmful effect on public health-delivered protections. Existing resources should be leveraged; access to federal dollars should not be written off or “left on the table”; long-standing financial support for public health (Grant-in Aid to counties) should be

restored and maintained; and existing opportunities (Medicaid) should be pursued. Georgia’s legislature should work in partnership with public health to pursue sustainable funding.

- **Leadership**—Leadership includes elected officials, state health director/officer, local boards of health and others. Despite being in the backyard of the nation’s premier public health agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and despite being surrounded by national organizations committed to improving the health of the public, Georgia has not always benefited from principled informed leadership clearly evident within its own public health ranks.
- **Workforce Capacity**—Georgia Public Health Association recommends giving attention to the revitalization of the public health workforce at the state and local level. Georgia’s public health workforce is a compassionate, dedicated group that continues to do more with less. Georgia must go beyond simply filling vacant positions—building and maintaining a 21st century public health workforce is the goal.

Conclusion:

In July 2010, supporters of public health in Georgia launched a campaign aimed at educating policymakers and the public about the need to reinvest in and rebuild the state’s public health system. The campaign, *Partner Up! For Public*

Health,⁶ has rolled out a Web site (www.togetherwecandobetter.com), organized a statewide advisory board of nearly 30 organizations and held advocacy Leadership Academies in Athens, Rome, Savannah and Tifton.

The campaign was initiated and funded by Healthcare Georgia Foundation in reaction to nearly a decade of funding cuts that have decimated the state’s public health system. This initiative is aimed at building public and political will to achieve the following:

- Move Georgia from the bottom on state health rankings to the top;
- Restore a decimated public health budget;
- Revitalize a dramatically downsized public health workforce;
- Ensure that public policy results in desirable public health outcomes;
- Position public health leadership with greater authority, autonomy and resources.

This campaign is a first step in many that we need to take to ensure the health of Georgia’s residents. Together we must build 21st century public health system that saves lives and money. If the health of each of us is inextricably linked to the health of all of us, then Georgia must preserve, protect and promote public health capacity. Together we can do better!





Endnotes

1. Georgia Public Health Association, www.gpha.org
2. America's Health Rankings, United Health Foundation, 2009
3. 2008 Health Rankings: Georgia and Georgia's Children, Healthcare Georgia Foundation, Publication #36, September 2009
4. Sebelius Announces New \$250 Million Investment to Lay Foundation for Prevention and Public Health, DHS Press Release
5. Trust for America's Health, Washington D.C.
6. Together We Can Do Better. Partner Up! For Public Health, Hayslett Group, Atlanta, Georgia

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Healthcare Georgia Foundation is a catalyst for better health and health care in Georgia.

Through strategic grantmaking, Healthcare Georgia Foundation supports organizations that drive positive change; promotes programs that improve health and health care among underserved individuals and communities; and connects people, partners and resources across Georgia.

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Healthcare Georgia Foundation is a statewide, private independent foundation whose mission is to advance the health of all Georgians and to expand access to affordable, quality health care for underserved individuals and communities.

