

21st Century Public Health Transformation

NEBRASKA

Nebraska is in the Midwestern region of the United States and has a population of 1.9 million people. The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services is a superagency with a state Division of Public Health that partners with decentralized local and Tribal health departments to comprise the governmental public health system in the state. Nebraska's governmental public health system aims to help its community members live better lives.

Transformation Approach

Nebraska's vision for statewide governmental public health transformation and modernization is grounded in the core models supported by the field of public health – the 10 Essential Public Health Services and the Foundational Public Health Services. The state is seeking a well-resourced and high performing public health system that has the following key elements in place:

- Well-established, trained, and supported public health workforce that has completed core education appropriate to their role and has access to continuing education opportunities;
- Generative partnerships, carefully curated networks, and good standing with community members;
- Clear and effective public health policy and enforcement;
- Modern, high quality, connected, and timely data and information systems;
- Effective and unified communications;
- Sustainable and flexible funding;
- Consistent planning;
- Active performance management and quality improvement;
- Skilled administration, management, and coordination of public health programs and activities;
- Resourceful and knowledgeable leadership;
- Credibility demonstrated through earned trust and confidence of stakeholders and community members; and,
- Intentional care and maintenance of the public health system.

The other key component of Nebraska's strategy to transform and modernize public health is a commitment to meeting national standards and measures for public health departments. The state public health agency has a long history of supporting public health department planning, assessment, and other accreditation readiness activities through funding and technical assistance. This commitment continues with a vision to have every health department on a pathway to meeting national accreditation standards, which may include at minimum engaging in regular community health assessment and health improvement planning activities or achieving and maintaining accreditation status.

Transformation & Equity Activities

There are many activities in progress to advance the Nebraska's vision, as outlined above, including the development of a health equity framework, ongoing workforce assessments, exploration of system-level metrics, and assessment of current status in moving toward the Foundational Capabilities. Representatives from Nebraska's governmental public health system (state, local, and Tribal health departments) gathered in November 2021 to explore the current reality of relationships between entities that make up the governmental public health system, identify opportunities for improvement, and to craft a vision for the future. The following strategic opportunities and initiatives were identified during the November meeting and outline Nebraska's current priorities for statewide governmental public health transformation and modernization:

1. Prioritize, improve, and commit to collaborative relationships in the governmental public health system.
2. Work across the governmental public health system to build collaborative systems.
3. Optimize governmental public health resources and dollars.
4. Create and implement a framework for an accessible, timely data system.
5. Develop a framework and definition for health equity in Nebraska.
6. Reframe and communicate the value of public health.

The recent formation of the Health Equity Taskforce has helped strengthen statewide efforts to advance equity in Nebraska. The Taskforce has completed assessment activities and is working to develop a framework to enhance health equity throughout the state. Based on preliminary findings from the Taskforce, local health departments are coordinating their statewide health assessment of minority communities and identifying a shared goal for the next two years. This will facilitate leveraging resources and expertise across the local public health system. In addition, several of the strategic opportunities identified above will increase the ability of public health departments to advance equity. For example, by modernizing the public health data systems in Nebraska, public health departments will be able to better access local data to assess health disparities and social determinants of health, thereby focusing local initiatives where they are most needed.

Outcomes & Plan

- During the 2022 Legislative session, the state public health agency made an attempt to update and revise the statute that guides the sharing of public health data. This is a necessary first step in data modernization efforts. Though the revision attempt did not pass, the state public health agency learned many lessons through the process and remains committed to identifying opportunities to streamline and improve sharing of public health data.
- At a workshop during the 2022 Nebraska Public Health Conference, participants contributed to high-level, beginning conversations around the development of a communications strategy that will positively frame the value of public health.
- The state public health agency is imagining a new way to assess foundational structures and organizational practices against public health values. The initial post-pandemic response will likely be to rush toward critical repairs in pursuit of stability and grounding. But the state public health agency is taking a step back to work with its partners to reconnect, renew, and create a new vision together. The agency is working to translate this vision into a single blueprint where all components of the system can see themselves and use it to move Nebraska's governmental public health system forward together.

Call to Action

- Members of the governmental public health system are engaged in and supportive of public health modernization efforts.
- This work requires a mix of strategic thinking, readiness, timing, and true collaboration.

The big lesson learned from the daunting experiences of the pandemic was that we need each other. We've had bright spots that illuminated the fact that the fundamental relationship between the state and local public health partners was necessary, valuable, and ultimately effective. The more we as a system began to think outside the box, the more we were able to maximize communication and our collaborative efforts to positively impact public health in Nebraska. Capitalizing on these newfound strengths and opportunities will be key as we move forward in modernizing the public health system in our state.