

Public Health Programs Must Be Funded To Serve Their Purpose

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A colleague of mine once quipped that when the average person thinks of “public health,” the first thing that typically comes to mind is “health care for poor people.” While such views have undoubtedly changed since that conversation some twenty years ago, public health services and the work of public health professionals remain underappreciated, if not invisible to most Nevadans.

The unfolding public health debacle in Clark County provides a timely case in point. The largely unheralded work undertaken by public health professionals at the Southern Nevada Health District and the Nevada State Health Division highlight the essential work of those charged with protecting the public’s health – in this case, the public’s protection from clinics and medical providers whose principal purpose was to improve our health in the first place.

First, though, what is public health?

Broadly speaking, “public health” refers to organized community efforts aimed at the prevention of disease, promotion of health, and ensuring access to quality health care for all. Public health is “public” because its activities are focused on the health of communities or populations, as opposed to the health of any individual or strictly clinical matters.

It is also public in that in the sense that such activity involves the organized, community-centered efforts of private organizations and public agencies, including the aforementioned state and county health departments, and the countless private and non-profit organizations whose missions embody our community’s interest in assuring and improving the conditions in which people can be healthy.

The national Institute of Medicine has identified a number of essential public health services required in every community to ensure the population’s health. These include, but are not limited to, the diagnosis and investigation of health problems and health hazards in the community; informing and educating people about health issues; and enforcing laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety.

The front lines of public health are the activities of our local or county health departments. These agencies are charged with ongoing surveillance and control of communicable diseases, environmental health protection and food hygiene enforcement, disaster planning, school and

community health education, and the provision of special health-related clinical services, including, yes, health care for poor people.

As you are reading this column, the Las Vegas community and other Nevadans are receiving a crash course in the value of essential public health services provided by local and state agencies. In January 2008, the Southern Nevada Health District received notification of three acute cases of hepatitis C from medical providers in the community. Typically only two cases of hepatitis C are reported to county officials each year.

Through a joint investigation with the Nevada Bureau of Licensure and Certification, the health district identified three additional cases of hepatitis C, and in a matter of weeks determined that all six cases could be linked to procedures performed at the Endoscopy Center of Southern Nevada.

We are slowly learning a great deal about the negligent and potentially criminal practices of the center in question, not to mention the betrayal of public trust by the “professionals” employed at the center and possibly other clinics in the valley.

It is only a matter of time before members of the legislature and other officials begin their handwringing about what local and state public health agencies could’ve or should’ve done to protect the public’s health.

Never mind the fact that many of these critics are the same folks who have historically underfunded public health in Nevada or, worse, supported cuts or “downsizing” to public health services in the name of fiscal prudence and no new taxes.

Again, the speed to the source of the hepatitis outbreak was identified by epidemiologists at the district and equally quick response of district officials in identifying and notifying those at risk is a testament to the professionalism and integrity of public health as it is practiced in Clark County and elsewhere in Nevada.

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