

North Dakota's Oil Boom Results in Public Health Challenges Due to an Increasing Population

An increase in population leads to increases in key factors contributing to public health challenges.

North Dakota's oil boom has brought increased revenue to the state and is attracting many new permanent and temporary residents. However, it has also brought a lot of changes and new struggles for public health. One challenge has been the increase of sexually transmitted diseases, not only in the counties affected by oil but across the state. Some counties have experienced growth in their chlamydia rates between 100 and 750 percent since 2009. In all of the western counties, the chlamydia rate has increased from 300 cases per 100,000 people in 2008 to 720 cases per 100,000 in 2012. One county experienced an increase from 190 to 700 cases per 100,000 people in that time period. The gonorrhea rate for North Dakota has increased over 100 percent from 2008 to 2012. Western counties have seen an increase of 72 percent in their gonorrhea rates. This and many other factors have led to overtaxing of private care clinics. The only hospital within a 40-mile radius, Mercy Medical Center, saw emergency room visits increase in 2012 by 50 percent over 2011 and its emergency room wait time double. The state has stepped in to assist with immunization programs, staffing shortage issues, and sustainable support for the new population.

Steps Taken:

- Last fall, the North Dakota Department of Health worked to develop mass immunization programs for the hardest hit areas in the western counties. Immunizations were provided across the board to children and adults, including the HPV vaccine.
- The North Dakota Department of Health initiated conversations with the University of North Dakota (UND) School of Medicine & Health Services to deal with short- and long-term issues with healthcare staffing and primary care workforce shortages.
- Training began for community chaplains, who are well distributed through western North Dakota, as a way to deal with issues of domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health while serving as a resource for the community.

- 36 of 53 North Dakota counties experienced chlamydia and or gonorrhea rates that at least doubled from 2009 to 2012.
- Mercy Medical Center in Williston, North Dakota, saw 30 percent more requests for medical services in 2011 than they could accept.

Results:

- In a collaborative effort between public health and the private sector in oil-producing counties, six immunization clinics occurred between September and October 2012 in Williston and Watford City. The clinics served 241 clients, who were given 611 doses, including 100 doses of influenza vaccine.
- Coordinated discussions between the UND School of Medicine & Health Services and the private sector addressed some of the short-term staffing shortages and long-term training issues regarding primary care, with a particular focus on the Williston area.



North Dakota's Oil Boom Results in Population Growth Across the State and Public Health Challenges

- In early March 2013, 23 community chaplains from multiple organizations were trained. They will be going through additional training to enhance their skills. Local public health units are connecting chaplains to faith-based pastors in the area who are overwhelmed with counseling needs, as well as other providers who do entry-level counseling services. The plan is to increase training opportunities as funding permits.

Lessons Learned:

- The North Dakota Department of Health asked the private sector and local health departments in the western counties what they needed instead of prescribing services. This has generated great interest and participation because perceived needs are being met through this community engagement. The private sector understands that keeping employees well impacts their bottom line.
- STD numbers may be increasing as clinics are getting better at screening patients for sexually transmitted diseases. From 2010 to 2011, the gonorrhea rates among males increased 57 percent. Sarah Weninger, epidemiologist at North Dakota Department of Health states that the increase seen in gonorrhea cases among men in 2011 could be due to enhanced partner services for confirmed cases—men with positive partners also getting screened.
- Chlamydia and gonorrhea rates are increasing statewide, as well as in western North Dakota. The North Dakota Department of Health has been organizing outreach events and collaborating with additional testing facilities to increase the availability of STD screening services in western North Dakota. Due to the large increase of gonorrhea cases in North Dakota from 2008 to 2012, epidemiologists in North Dakota have been focusing on partner services for confirmed gonorrhea cases, especially in western North Dakota and on American Indian reservations.

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