Iowa Expands Services for Homeless and Veteran Communities Through Annual Collaborative Partnerships

The Iowa Department of Public Health is partnering with Linn County Public Health to support the annual “5 Seasons Stand Down” collaborative by providing vaccines and event coordination. This state and local partnership has expanded service opportunities for homeless and veteran communities.

The Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) is often approached by local health agencies to build immunization programs specifically for vaccination efforts and immunization partnerships. Iowa’s Linn County Public Health approached IDPH to provide flu and Tdap vaccines at the “5 Seasons Stand Down.” This partnership originally began to help address seasonal flu, and led to the development of improved environmental services in homeless shelters, new service opportunities for preventing the spread of infectious disease, and stronger connections to at-risk populations for emergency response planning. The “Stand Down” event is for veterans and families that are homeless or nearly homeless. The event provides health services and linkages to community service programs. Individuals may receive information on free health programs such as the Care For Yourself Program, help with applying for health insurance, and health screenings. Connecting with organizational networks that support homeless and veteran communities enables public health professionals to better understand and reach these populations creatively.

Steps Taken:

- Since 2010, Linn County Public Health, located in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has helped plan and provide flu vaccinations for “5 Seasons Stand Down,” which is an annual, day-long collaborative effort aimed to connect homeless or near-homeless veterans and non-veterans to services that assist them in transitioning to community living.
- Linn County Community Services helps plan the event each year, working with local veteran organizations, government, and community agencies. Specifically, these include Veterans Affairs, Veterans Outreach Center at the VA hospital, Linn County General Assistance Office, Aging and Disability Resource Center of Linn County, Heritage Area Agency on Aging, Iowa Legal Aid, Salvation Army, and community colleges.
- Starting in 2013, Tdap vaccinations were added to the health services at the Stand Down. The state immunization registry is used to check immunization history, as applicable, and to enter data on vaccines given, so information will be readily available if an individual seeks care in the community or at the annual Stand Down.
- Partnerships formed resulted in a host of service opportunities beyond immunization. Linn County Public Health staff assist individuals with learning about the health department and services offered and provide tuberculosis screening and case management and STI screening and treatment. This work has strengthened community bonds with agencies in Linn County that work
with the homeless, including the HealthCare for the Homeless Coalition, Parish Nurses, and the Women’s Leadership Initiative.

Results:

- Vaccination services, like flu and Tdap, were made available to at-risk populations not commonly reached through immunization clinics. In 2013, 58 percent of attendees were veterans (many non-veterans were family members), 36 percent reported a disability, and 41 percent reported they were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.
- In 2013, Linn County Public Health also provided hepatitis C screening and treatment referral. At least one new case was identified and linked to care.
- Partnerships formed through collaborative event planning resulted in increased trust and knowledge of each organization’s expertise. As a result, local health service delivery for both homeless and veteran populations have expanded:
  - Linn County Public Health is now involved in community homeless committees (Healthcare for the Homeless and Linn County Continuum of Care for Homeless Services).
  - Linn County Public Health staff work with homeless shelters to offer vaccines for clients.
  - Public health department staff have partnered with shelter staff to increase use of evidence based practices for managing and preventing problems like scabies, lice, bed bugs, and TB.
  - Environmental health staff partner with shelter staff to assure safe and healthy food storage and preparation practices.
  - In 2014, Linn County Public Health worked with partners regarding Strategic National Stockpile Training and Linn Response partners held a tabletop scenario.

Lessons Learned:

- Local health agency funding for one program area can have a ripple effect for others.
- New partnerships can be leveraged to advance other program work and address broader community priorities.
- Linking with existing community coalitions and networks to plan Stand Downs, and other such events, can help develop new organizational relationships.
- Setting clear expectations among all partners and staying true to each other’s missions is critical to success.
- Partnering with organizations that are trusted by community enable access to populations that might be hard to reach.

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