Oregon Addresses Rising Immunization Exemptions Through Vaccine Safety Communications Campaign

To curb the trend of rising religious exemption rates, the Oregon Immunization Program developed an extensive vaccine safety social marketing campaign.

Rates of religious exemptions to school immunizations are climbing in Oregon, with the statewide rate for kindergarteners increasing from 2.4 percent for the 2000-2001 school year to 5.6 percent for the 2010-2011 school year. Research has determined that parents are getting misinformation from internet sources when they have questions about the safety of vaccines. In 2010, the Oregon Immunization Program, a department within the Oregon Public Health Division, created a vaccine safety social marketing campaign to increase the number of Oregonian children who are fully immunized according to the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices’ recommendations. The program’s efforts use web technology, healthcare provider education and support, and outreach strategies to provide parents with the information they need to make informed decisions about vaccines.

Steps Taken:

- Funded entirely by the Section 317 Immunization Grant Program, the Oregon Immunization Program hired a full-time communications specialist who reduced the agency public information officer’s workload.
- The specialist used the Oregon Public Health Division’s website to create a vaccine safety sub-site for parents that includes science-based information on vaccines, Oregonians’ personal stories of experiences with vaccine-preventable disease, book reviews, an open letter from providers across the state urging parents to immunize their children, and links to reputable resources.
- Working through schools, the specialist was able to create a peer network of parents who served as sources of information to other parents.
- The Oregon Partnership to Immunize Children funded other expenses, such as the statewide advertising campaign and educational materials.
- Other partners included national and local organizations, such as ASTHO, Vaccines for Children, the Oregon Adult Immunization Coalition, VAX Northwest, and the ALERT Immunization Information System.

Results:

- The communications specialist was able to streamline vaccine safety messages by using Facebook and Twitter and by connecting with local health departments and subject matter experts.
- The campaign started in March 2010 and is ongoing, but the Oregon Immunization Program has seen a marked increase in traffic to their vaccine safety website after targeted ad campaigns in high religious exemption rate (8-12%) areas.
- Oregon is now launching a pilot project that works with parents in schools with high exemption rates to share vaccine safety information through panel discussions, newsletter articles,
enhancing the website, and a measles model showing how a school outbreak might affect students.

Lessons Learned:

• Hiring a dedicated communications specialist who has varied skills in writing, media relations, marketing, social media, and outreach proved beneficial. The communications specialist is an essential resource who has increased efficiencies across the immunization program.

• Building relationships with parent groups was successful in this case but can be difficult because of the unique populations they represent. Oregon reached out to principals, PTAs, and other parent groups to spread their messaging.

• For states without the capacity for a new hire, allowing a current employee to execute a smaller-scale vaccine safety plan would also be beneficial. This may require thinking outside of the box to move funding around to facilitate such a plan.

For more information:

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