

APPLETREE COVID-19 Supplemental Awards

Arkansas Department of Health

Introduction

In early 2021, ASTHO, with support from CDC's National Center for Environmental Health and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), announced awards to five state health agencies to support their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. State health agencies in Kentucky, Virginia, Arkansas, Vermont, and Indiana were selected for this opportunity because of their recent application to ATSDR's Partnership to Promote Local Efforts to Reduce Environmental Exposure (APPLETREE) cooperative agreement program. Vermont requested that ASTHO work directly with their partner organization, [Informed Green Solutions \(IGS\)](#), for this project. ASTHO provided funding and assistance to the recipient state health agencies and state health agency partners to support their environmental health-related COVID-19 response activities. This factsheet outlines planned activities and their associated outcomes under these awards for the Arkansas Department of Health (ADH).

Planned Activities

ADH's Environmental Health Branch planned to conduct a variety of proposed activities as part of this funding award aimed at supporting COVID-19 response and community engagement. Activities planned as part of this award included:

- Performing COVID-19 inspections and consultations during standard on-site restaurant inspections. The goal is to facilitate public understanding and compliance with ADH/CDC guidance and directives through April 1, 2021.
- Reviewing plans and consulting with event planners to ensure events, such as weddings and sporting events, are conducted as safely as possible and according to ADH/CDC guidance and directives through Feb. 28, 2021 (when directives were relaxed).
- Installing software packages to allow for the geocoding of COVID-19 data. By geocoding COVID-19 patient data, ADH will be able to better address health disparities during vaccine distribution decision making, as well as better define cases within sewersheds for monitoring purposes.
- Consulting with individuals and businesses to answer any questions regarding COVID-19 mitigation measures. ADH will also work with businesses to identify and notify owners of any potential employee outbreaks.

Project Outcomes

ADH's Environmental Health Branch completed several activities through this funding award. Specifically, this award was instrumental in expanding the Environmental Health Branch and ADH's internal Geographic Information System (GIS) capabilities. Prior to the pandemic, most of ADH's GIS capabilities were within the Engineering Section in the Environmental Health Branch. Most often, information for the Branch's geocoding work was sourced from online resources to determine restaurant or home locations with specific issues (e.g., septic issues). Medical data, which requires strict privacy protections, was not geocoded. However, through this award, the Environmental Health Branch was able to install HIPAA-compliant geocoding software for ADH use, which granted ADH the capacity to conduct detailed analyses of protected COVID-19 medical data internally. The ADH [COVID-19 Dashboard](#), which is supported by the ADH Epidemiology Branch and the state-wide Arkansas GIS Office through a data use agreement, is now housed solely within ADH. Previously, the dashboard was housed

in the Arkansas GIS Office. Overall, improving internal GIS capabilities stimulated a variety of GIS-related projects within ADH, including initiatives to geocode and analyze information relating to other infectious diseases and hire staff dedicated to GIS.

This project also helped sustain and expand the existing COVID-19 response activities within the Environmental Health Branch. To streamline the process for conducting COVID-19 compliance inspections and consultations for retail food establishments, ADH developed an online smartphone app to replace the existing paper questionnaire used by environmental health specialists. Overall, 1,529 inspections were conducted between Feb. 1 and April 1, 2021. Similarly, to facilitate plan review for large gatherings (i.e., over 100 attendees) in accordance with the governor's directives at the time, ADH created a website which allowed event planners to access directives, CDC and ADH guidance, as well as upload planning documents for review. ADH reviewed plans for 992 events from Jan. 1 through Feb. 28, 2021. Finally, this funding supported ADH's efforts to consult with individuals and businesses with concerns around COVID-19. ADH directed approximately 2,100 complicated, technical questions and concerns from the ADH COVID-19 phone hotline to the Environmental Health Branch between January and mid-February 2021.

Project Challenges and Barriers

During this project, ADH encountered several challenges and barriers:

- With knowledge of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and proper mitigation measures continuously evolving and changing, ensuring guidance, directives, and communications materials were up-to-date was always a challenge.
- Filling out, scanning, and tabulating the high amount of paper COVID-19 compliance inspection reports for retail food establishments slowed down the work of the environmental health specialists. As mentioned previously, ADH transitioned from the paper reporting system to an online app that enabled environmental health specialists to complete and submit inspection reports in real time.
- Arkansas experienced a severe winter storm in February 2021, which limited or shut down state COVID-19 response activities, including inspections and consultations, for several days.

Reflections and Final Thoughts

Some final thoughts and lessons learned throughout the project included the following:

- Transitioning to the retail food establishment inspection reporting app earlier in the pandemic would have helped staff expedite these inspections and the associated reporting. However, with this award's support, ADH was able to quickly develop this app in one day.
- Improving GIS capabilities within ADH was beneficial for the COVID-19 response. Use of GIS will be expanded to other public health areas within ADH.
- Despite the challenges of the ever-changing nature of COVID-19 response and Arkansas' shifting guidance and directives, ADH's internal processes had to adjust quickly to maintain accurate and up-to-date resources and guidance, as well as to ensure new information was being communicated consistently to the public and other stakeholders.