

Kent County Health Department: A Story of Successful Inclusion of People with Disabilities

June 2015

Emergency Preparedness at KCHD

Michigan's Kent County Health Department (KCHD) has been including people with disabilities in its programs, policies, and procedures for several years. KCHD realizes how important it is to include people with disabilities in emergency preparedness planning efforts. In 2007, KCHD's emergency preparedness program was mandated to develop partnerships in its jurisdiction to report on and determine how to include people with disabilities in emergency response planning. As a result, KCHD developed a committee of organizations that serve people with disabilities and other human services agencies that provide cultural services to the elderly and children. Today, KCHD has developed a network of 70 organizations that serve vulnerable populations. In the past year, KCHD's emergency preparedness program started to develop a citizen stakeholder group to improve on the department's efforts to include people with disabilities. As a result of this group, which included many people with disabilities, people with disabilities are now included in all emergency management and evacuation planning efforts.

KCHD's goal is to educate individuals in Kent County and ensure they understand emergency information. Within the health department, KCHD expands the reach of its emergency preparedness plans and procedures through word of mouth. Among the community, KCHD is creating five training modules: Introduction to Emergency Preparedness, Fire Safety, CPR, First Aid, and CERT (Emergency Response Team Training). Those who complete the courses will receive a certificate and have an opportunity to become a peer trainer for the Introduction to Emergency Preparedness training module.

Words of Wisdom

"You might think you are doing well, but policies and laws change, so you have to consistently adapt."

—Mary, Immunization Supervisor, Community Clinical Services

"Include people with disabilities from the beginning to the end so in the end you can say, 'We heard this from you. This is what we did to accommodate [you].' Then evaluate to find out if [you] hit the mark or continue to make modifications."

—Chelsey, Quality and Performance Manager, Accreditation Coordinator

In addition, The Arc of the United States, the largest national community-based organization advocating for and serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families, is incorporating KCHD's emergency preparedness procedures into its strategic plan to help promote preparedness messages. KCHD anticipates that involving as many different venues as possible will help to increase the reach and education of emergency preparedness messages. For example, KCHD researched how to create effective emergency messages for the population of Kent County, focusing on people with sensory disabilities. KCHD determined practical ways to reach people with sensory disabilities during disaster situations, such as modifying TV messages with subtitles and sound notifications and using Facebook and Twitter).

Going Above and Beyond

Children's Special Health Care Services (CSHCS) provides programs and services to children with medically diagnosed special needs between the ages of 0 to 21; the agency also emphasizes parental involvement, which is reflected in the CSHCS mission. KCHD participates in CSHCS and serves approximately 2,700 children annually. The KCHD division of CSHCS develops strong support for parents of children that require special healthcare services. Through grant funds, the program has supplemented its on-site parent support group with a virtual meeting space on Facebook and a Facebook page administrator (a parent), which allows group members to communicate effectively.

Historically, parents voluntarily ran the support groups at KCHD. However, participation was inconsistent due to barriers that prevented volunteers from donating time. KCHD applied for a mini-grant from CSHCS to increase parental participation in the parent support group. KCHD used the grant to provide food and offer child care during the support groups. The parents and program supervisor expressed the desire to have a social media platform to use for communication. Communication began with a list service (now with 1,500 participants) and evolved into the Facebook page (with 300 participants) mentioned above.

Participants use Facebook to exchange information, share community events and resources, and support one another. A parent, program supervisor, and public relations manager work together to facilitate the Facebook page. The parents do almost all of the work, including posting events and maintaining resources.

Additional Successes

Over the past 10 years, KCHD has been improving the inclusion of people with disabilities into different areas including community health needs assessment (CHNA), health education, and clinical services. KCHD recognizes that the work is not yet done, but staff are doing their best with the time and resources they have to include people with disabilities. Following are examples of ways the health department has improved its ability to include people with disabilities:

- KCHD ensured that its CHNA integrated questions for people with disabilities. KCHD wanted to make sure the voices of people with disabilities were heard. Prior to the assessment launch, the health department held focus groups with organizations that worked with people with disabilities and used KCHD services to generate and construct appropriate questions for the CHNA.
- KCHD holds workshops to accommodate people with hearing and visual impairments.
- As part of workforce development, KCHD offers cultural competency and health literacy training (e.g., cultural differences, languages, special needs).
- KCHD provides health education programming and offers services to school-aged children and adults. The school-aged programs are adapted for students that are either enrolled in an inclusion or special education classroom. One staff member sought disability advocates training after a visually impaired participant attended one of her cooking classes.
- KCHD adapted health education programming about healthy relationships at the request of community partners. A vital community partner has been the YWCA, which develops domestic and sexual violence-prevention programs and resources for victims with disabilities. The YWCA also offers training on best practices for working with and educating people with disabilities.

Words of Wisdom

“Don’t recreate the wheel. Look at the broad-base [perspective] and use effective communication.”—Dawn, Public Health Educator, Community Wellness Division, Nutrition & Culinary Education

“Working to include people with disabilities is a process that never ends and a conversation that will always continue. Once you start, you are not going to finish. It is a process that keeps going and [gets] better and better.”—Pat, Emergency Preparedness Specialist

Share a Story

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), with support from the National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and The Arc of the United States, promotes the inclusion and engagement of people with disabilities in planning, implementing, and evaluating public health programs, products, and services. NACCHO informs and educates local health departments about health and disability activities and resources, supports a peer-assistance network, and develops and promotes model practices related to health-promotion activities for people with disabilities. One way NACCHO informs local health departments about inclusion efforts is through success stories such as this. To share a story, visit NACCHO’s Stories from the Field website at <http://www.nacchostories.org/>.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Acknowledgments: This publication was made possible through support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Cooperative Agreement #1U38OT000172-02. NACCHO is grateful for this support. Its contents are solely the views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the sponsor. NACCHO thanks 2015 Health and Disability Fellows Angelina Gero, MPH, and Bree Bode, MPH, for their hard work on this story and KCHD staff for taking the time to meet with NACCHO.

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