13-01

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Internet-Based Tools and Mobile Technology

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) supports the use of Internet-based tools (such as social media platforms, blogs, organization/agency websites, e-mail, chat rooms, etc.) and mobile technologies (handheld devices used for texting or access to mobile and Web applications) by local health departments to achieve essential public health functions. These public health functions include the following:

- Disease prevention and control through engagement of affected populations;
- Education and outreach to the public;
- Information collection about health concerns or disaster conditions in a particular jurisdiction.
- Adoption of branding as a business practice to differentiate local health department services from other health providers, raise their visibility in the community, and increase their perceived value to the public, policymakers, funders, and other key stakeholders.[1]

NACCHO encourages local health departments to do the following:

- Work with local governments to amend or repeal existing information technology systems and policy barriers that may prevent the use of Internet-based tools and mobile technologies.
- Establish clearly written policies and procedures for the appropriate use of Internet-based tools and mobile technologies, including standards to ensure confidentiality and compliance with federal, state and local laws.
- Provide appropriate training and resources to local health department staff so they can effectively and appropriately use Internet-based tools and mobile technologies.
- Develop and disseminate field-tested, evidence-based practices, policies, and guidelines for using Internet-based tools and mobile technologies.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and appropriate federal agencies should encourage local health departments to use Internet-based tools and mobile technologies and provide resources and technical assistance to facilitate adoption of such technologies.

Justification

Internet-based tools and mobile technologies are strategic methods for conveying public health messages, gathering information, and communicating with targeted populations. These tools and technologies can be integral to the development of innovative approaches to addressing public health issues. Evidence has shown that in disaster situations, Internet-based tools and mobile

technologies can help provide information about affected populations and neighborhoods, in some cases faster than traditional methods of information collection.[2]

Internet-based tools and mobile technologies also offer new opportunities for local health department branding in order to differentiate their services from other health providers, raise their visibility in the community, and increase their perceived value. A strong brand is formed by the organization's every communication, action, and interaction with the public, policymakers, funders, and other key stakeholders, and helps communicate that the local health department and its services are relevant and uniquely able to meet community needs.[2]

However, some local health department and local government policies and information technology systems (such as Web-filtering software) pose barriers to the effective use of Internet-based tools and mobile technologies. Such policies and information technology systems were adopted in the early days of these technologies and were based on unfamiliarity and lack of evidence, guidance, and model policies for their use. Policies and information technology systems that restrict access to and use of Internet-based tools and mobile technologies can prevent innovative opportunities to enhance public health practice. These tools have great potential to change the way local health departments do their work, improving efficiency and expanding the reach of programs and services. Many local health departments are already taking advantage of these options and realizing the added value to their work.

One area of particular concern regarding implementation of these tools is the privacy requirement of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). Under the Act, disclosure of some information is restricted.[3] However, there are ways of keeping information confidential and adhering to laws and regulations while using these tools. An organizational policy is a first step in acknowledging employee activity, managing risks, and implementing appropriate rules of engagement. Security of information must also be maintained for the effective use of Internet-based tools and mobile technologies.

Using Internet-based tools and mobile technologies to provide information to and establish a more reciprocal relationship with key stakeholders and other community members has the potential to improve healthcare quality and safety; increase the efficiency of healthcare and public health service delivery; improve the public health information infrastructure; support care in the community and at home; facilitate clinical and consumer decision-making; and build health skills and knowledge.[4] The U.S. population is increasingly using Internet-based tools to find answers to their health-related questions. These searches can happen through search engines, chat rooms, social media, forums, and other Web communication platforms. A recent report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 80 percent of Internet users have looked online for health information, highlighting the importance of public health using this modality for message dissemination.[5] As more individuals use these platforms to search for information about their health and even to track their health status, local health departments have the opportunity to interact with individuals and communities through Internet-based tools and mobile technologies to provide accurate and timely health information. With the strategic use of these tools, local health departments can foster the availability of patient- and public-centered health information and services exchange.

One example of how Internet-based tools and mobile technologies are being used for public health activities involves the use of mobile devices, such as cell phones and tablets. In the United States, 88 percent of adults have a mobile phone, and about 45 percent of those are smartphones.[6] African-Americans and Latinos who are proficient in English are more likely to own smartphones than White Americans.[7] Some local health departments are utilizing mobile devices for data collection and surveillance, health promotion, disease-management, patient reminders, and outreach to vulnerable populations.[8] Additionally, mobile devices allow individuals to access health-related information in a timely manner from wherever they may be located.

The use of Internet-based tools and mobile technologies offers additional resources in the arsenal of traditional means of health education and promotion. Although some disparities remain in the use of Internet-based tools and mobile technologies, data shows that the population using these tools has become more diverse over the last decade.[7] If local health departments do not avail themselves of these newer, more immediate, strategic, and effective communications options, they risk missing out on opportunities to improve public health practice and ultimately, improve the public's health. Local health departments have the opportunity to use these powerful and cost-effective tools to develop innovative solutions to public health problems and raise their visibility among stakeholders.

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Record of Action

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