



National Public Health Leadership Development Network

2007 Balderson Leadership Project Awards RUNNER-UP

Northeast Regional Public Health Leadership Institute

Individual/Team Members

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Improving Communications During Public Meetings

Goal: Our vision is to challenge the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the Department of Health (DOH) staff to find strategies that will allow for more effective communication to increase the public's knowledge, understanding and perception of environmental exposure issues that could impact men, women, children and sensitive or vulnerable populations. This is too important to be left to chance. It is the responsibility of State agencies to enable the public to make informed decisions that will affect their welfare and health.

Introduction: The DOH Bureau of Environmental Exposure Investigation staff communicates with community members throughout New York regarding their perception of potential exposures to contaminants in the environment. We participate in public meetings held by our partner, DEC, and occasionally federal agencies, when community members are informed of health and exposure information about hazardous waste sites, while we seek their input and support on investigations and remedial actions.

From June 2006 to June 2007, staff participated in 111 public meetings about waste sites, which were attended by 3,656 stakeholders. Some of these waste sites are controversial and 300-400 people attended the meetings, whereas other meetings had only a few. Some meetings are more successful than others, and from our experience, the State's message is not always understood. As public servants, it is important to relay information effectively to improve the public's understanding of vital environmental public health issues. Staff does not receive formal communication training, but rather learn on-the-job. Consequently, effective communication skills and approaches need to be appropriately developed and techniques improved.

Methods: In order to do this, staff established a work group with DOH's Education and Outreach Unit and citizen participation specialists from DEC. The need to better understand our meeting audiences was discussed and ways that our effectiveness could be improved were identified. As a result of these collaborations, important new strategies have been implemented. A demographic review around waste site areas is now performed prior to public meetings to provide for a better understanding of community characteristics. Also, a public meeting survey has been developed to obtain feedback on the agencies' abilities to relay their messages and staff is encouraged to attend training opportunities provided by the state. This training will assist staff in learning the importance of applying communication skills learned at NEPHLI, especially to develop a single overriding communications objective (SOCO). Following the meetings, surveys are reviewed and evaluated and the results are used to tailor future meetings to target audiences. Part of improving communications is practicing it, and weekly project review presentations are held in-house for staff to develop their presentation skills. Sister agencies in 30 states were contacted to determine if effective communication strategies are practiced that could be emulated.

Discussion: Currently many state agencies have limited resources and do not always provide adequate funds for training. However, as NEPHLI Scholars trained in collaborative leadership and through our interagency work group, we have influenced DEC to initiate more training to provide greater learning opportunities. We will continue to work with DEC to urge them to continue this initiative. DOH staff is utilizing available training and will pursue additional training opportunities as time and resources allow.

Conclusion: By increasing our effectiveness at communication, public understanding and knowledge of environmental health issues will improve. It will foster collaboration with stakeholders and ultimately enable the support and input from the community on essential public health exposure issues. To the best of our knowledge, no other states are implementing a comprehensive plan such as this. This project will serve as a pilot that can be used as a model by others to enhance successful public meetings on important public health issues.