



Marietta/Belpre Health Department: Carrying Forward Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Marietta/Belpre Health Department in Ohio serves a rural population of roughly 20,000 people. During the COVID-19 pandemic, staff at the small health department got creative to keep residents informed. Eventually, the department would come through the pandemic stronger than before, with staff applying valuable lessons learned — including a heightened focus on emergency preparedness.

But early in the pandemic, the demands of the response — particularly communicating with residents about ever-evolving information and guidance — strained the small staff.

“We didn’t have someone who was dedicated to communications,” said Rebecca Aber, Accreditation Coordinator and Grants Administrator. “It was hard to prioritize communications because we had other work we needed to carry out, like our state-mandated accreditation process. But yet we had this pandemic going on that took precedence over anything else.”

Still, the health department succeeded in reaching community members by switching up its approach. “Early on, we were putting articles in the newspaper, updating our social media, and sharing the communications materials passed down from state and national sources — but we were still missing people because not everyone has social media or reads the newspaper,” Aber said. So the health department put up billboards in the area and the then-health commissioner did TV spots on local news stations to educate community members about COVID-19 and the health department’s services.





With these experiences top of mind, the health department identified the need for a dedicated communications coordinator as its top priority during an after-action assessment of its pandemic response. As a result, it brought on Amber Gossett-Bailey as Health Planning and Promotion Coordinator and Public Information Officer.

The pandemic response also spurred the health department to step up its emergency preparedness efforts — like by updating its emergency response plan through the National Association of County and City Health Officials’ COVID-19 Workforce Project. “The Workforce Project helped us realize where we had shortfalls,” Aber said.

Post-pandemic, staff have used routine public health events to test their readiness for emergencies. “We used our recent drive-through flu clinic as a mock emergency drill to practice what we’ll do if we have another event like COVID-19 where we need to get a vaccine out very quickly,” said Gossett-Bailey. “We know who’s in charge and who’s taking on what role.”

And though the pandemic had a major impact on the health department’s work and staff, Gossett-Bailey is more interested in looking forward. “COVID’s still here, and it’s always going to be here,” she said. “But it’s time to start looking to the future — not in the rearview at what happened in 2020. There’s more to public health than COVID, and I think to grow, we need to start realizing that.”

Learn more about Marietta/Belpre Health Department’s work:
mariettabelprehealth.org

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