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Public Health in Washington State Q&A

What is public health?

Public health is an essential service guaranteed to all residents by Washington State law. From drinking water safety and restaurant inspections to tobacco use prevention and disease prevention and control, the work of public health is to help communities to be safe and healthy.

How is public health different from health care?

Health care focuses on delivering services to the individual to treat illness and maintain health. Public health focuses on helping communities to be safer and healthier. Treating an individual with an E. coli infection is an example of a health care service. Monitoring and responding to the E. coli outbreak in a community and working to prevent future outbreaks is a public health service. Health care and public health work together to ensure individual and community well being.

What do public health agencies do?

The work of public health can be summarized in three categories:

- **Essential programs for improving health:** programs like immunizations, communicable disease prevention and testing and public education
- **Information that works:** Public health provides resources such as educational programs and training on health issues ranging from tobacco prevention to healthy aging; information on community health trends; statewide health and safety information.
- **Protecting you and your family everyday:** Public health provides services that protect our communities from hazards in the environment. Services include: drinking water safety, air quality testing, septic system inspections, restaurant inspections, health care provider and hospital licensing.

What comprises the public health network in Washington State?

A network of local and state agencies provide coverage throughout Washington State:

- **Local:** There are 35 local health jurisdictions serving 39 counties. Three jurisdictions serve more than one county:
 - Benton/Franklin
 - Chelan/Douglas
 - Ferry/Stevens/Pend O'reille
- **Statewide agencies or organizations** provide funding, deliver programs and develop policies and regulations that impact the health of all Washington residents:
 - The Washington Department of Health
 - Washington State Board of Health
- Another important public health partner, the University of Washington School of Public Health and Community Medicine, helps prepare the public health

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workforce, sending students into the field for practical experience and keeping the workforce current in the latest research and skills.

Who benefits from public health services?

Many people associate public health with health care services for low-income people, but this is false. Public health services cover **all** people in Washington. Everyone benefits from services like drinking water safety, restaurant inspections and communicable disease prevention and control.

Who oversees public health services in Washington?

Washington has 35 local public health agencies that provide services and make decisions at the local level. Statewide organizations like the Washington State Department of Health and the State Board of Health work to monitor health trends, develop public health policies and coordinate a statewide response to communicable disease outbreaks, and epidemics of chronic diseases and injuries.

How is public health funded?

Public health services are funded by a combination of local, state and federal dollars. Funding decisions are made by local county commissioners, the Washington Legislature and the United States House of Representatives and Senate.

How do people use public health services?

People use public health services everyday—services like drinking water safety and hospital and health care provider licensing—without even realizing it. Other services, such as immunizations, tobacco prevention education and information on community health trends are available from local health districts in every community.