
Improving Public Health in Portage County

Executive Summary

**Prepared by
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The Task Force for Improving Public Health in Portage County presents this report as the culmination of the first phase of an initiative to strengthen the public health system in Portage County. The report lays the groundwork for the three health departments – Kent City, Ravenna City, and Portage County General Health District – to develop a detailed plan of action that they can then implement over the next five years. The report identifies what the community should expect from their local public health system in terms of the range of services they should provide, the performance standards they should meet, and the types of traditional and emerging health threats they should be able to address. The report also:

- Includes a description of the programs and services the three health departments currently provide in comparison with what public health experts consider to be “essential public health services.”
- Provides health data for the population of Portage County that highlights areas where the public health system can work to improve health status.
- Describes the facilities used by the health departments and their relationship to the respective city and county governments.
- Identifies issues related to the current staffing patterns and compensation packages of the health departments that must be addressed if a consolidation of two or all three departments were to occur.
- Provides a comparison of the annual revenues and expenditures of the three health departments.
- Identifies legal issues that must be reviewed in the event a consolidation should occur.
- Describes the options contained in the Ohio Revised Code that stipulate how local health departments in the state can organize and govern themselves.

The task force acknowledges that the report does not provide certain data and information relevant to the issue of consolidation and resource sharing between local health departments. For example, the report does not include an analysis of what the cost implications of consolidation might be to the health department governing authorities and the citizens of Portage County. It does not include an official legal review or opinion relative to the contractual and other legal issues highlighted in the report. And finally, the report does not present a well-defined reconfiguration of what a consolidated health department would be in terms of a table of organization, the distribution of programs and services within the county, staffing patterns, and other operational details. These and other details would need to be worked out by the health departments themselves to ensure that any realignment of health departments results in the best possible service delivery system for the residents of the cities and county.

This report represents Phase I towards improving the public health system in Portage County. We urge the leadership of the health departments to implement Phase II by considering the task force’s recommendations and developing a plan of action.

Sincerely,

Ralph Kletzien, Task Force Co-chair

Bob Howard, Task Force Co-chair

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was a collaborative effort between the Task Force to Improve Public Health in Portage County, the Kent City Health Department, Ravenna City Health Department, Portage County General Health District, and Kent State University's College of Public Health. We would like to thank everyone for their dedication and effort. The members of the Task Force to Improve Public Health in Portage County:

Township Trustees:

James Hammar, Freedom Township
Sandra K. Templeton, Edinburg Township
Dan Derreberry, Atwater Township

Portage Co. Board of Health Members:

Bob Palmer
Amy Hammar (District Licensing Council)

Robinson Memorial Hospital:

Brad Raum

Community Specialists:

Bob Howard (formerly with Akron Childrens' Hospital, Brady Lake resident)
Ralph Kletzien (Executive Director of Portage Foundation)
Kelly A. Engelhart (formerly with Center for Public Administration & Public Policy, Kent State University)
Annette Petranic (Pavlick Consulting Group, Inc.)

Northeast Ohio Medical University:

Anthony Costa, M.D.

Kent City Board of Health Members:

John Gwinn (former board member)
Doug Wagener

Ravenna City Board of Health Members:

Dorothy Jones
Lucy Ribelin

Health Department staff:

Kent City Health Department;

John Ferlito, Health Commissioner, retired
John Bradshaw, Assistant Health Commissioner
Jeff Neistadt, Health Commissioner

Portage County General Health District:

Dwayne Porter, Health Commissioner
Rosemary Ferraro, Nursing Director

Ravenna City Health Department:

Lynette Blasiman, Former Health Commissioner
Kelly Engelhart, Acting Health Commissioner
Mayor Joseph Bica, Mayor of Ravenna

Kent State University's Research Team:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Task Force to Improve Public Health in Portage County was formed as a result of a community meeting called by Mayor Joseph Bica of Ravenna that was held on March 8, 2011 at the Ravenna High School. Several dozen community members attended the meeting that was designed to initiate a study process to explore options for strengthening the public health system in the county, including the possibility of consolidating the Ravenna City, Kent City, and Portage County health departments into one department. The task force was formed consisting of two members of the boards of health from each of the three health departments, three representatives from the Township Trustees, one representative from Robinson Memorial Hospital, one representative from the Northeast Ohio Medical University, and representatives from the community with expertise in health. The task force voted to have Mr. Bob Howard and Mr. Ralph Kletzien serve as co-chairs, which they agreed to do. Although the health commissioners from the three health departments were not voting members of the task force, they were invited to attend the meetings to serve as a resource in providing information as needed.

The roles and responsibilities of the task force were agreed to as follows:

- a. Steer and evaluate the study of information gathered by the Kent State University College of Public Health.
- b. Make recommendations and advise decisions to the three boards of health regarding the evaluation of the study data.
- c. Investigate and recommend solutions for an improved public health system in Portage County.

The task force met monthly from April – December 2011. A team from Kent State University's College of Public Health provided the task force with data and information regarding the public health system in Portage County and facilitated the meetings. The following issues were analyzed by the Kent State team and discussed by the task force:

- **Public health standards and accreditation:** The task force unanimously adopted the 10 Essential Public Health Services as its desired framework for developing strategies to improve the public health system in Portage County. This framework was created by national public health experts and was used to develop an accreditation system for state and local health departments. The Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) administers the accreditation system that provides a mechanism to determine the capacity of health departments to deliver needed services to their communities.

- **Community health indicators for Portage County:** Data on the health needs of Portage County that were examined included risk factors for chronic disease, environmental factors, unintentional injuries, behavioral risk factors, and clinical care services. Areas for improvement that were identified included chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure; lifestyle risk factors such as smoking, obesity, and fruit and vegetable consumption; unintentional injuries; and suicide. Because of this, it is important for the health departments in Portage County to be able to develop effective programs to address these health concerns, either through partnerships with other organizations or through their own programs.

- **Programs and services currently provided by the health departments in Portage County:** The primary types of services currently provided by the three health departments are environmental health and nursing services. Based on an analysis of programs and services currently being provided by the three health departments, it was concluded that the current services are not sufficient to address the 10 Essential Services or to meet PHAB accreditation standards.

- **Staffing and personnel issues relevant to system improvement strategies:**

In the three health departments, there are more staff dedicated to environmental health programs than any other service area and fewer staff available to work in areas such as chronic disease and injury prevention, as well as the delivery of a number of the 10 Essential Services. Currently, there are 32 full-time employees and 7 part-time employees between the three health departments. It is likely that the current staffing levels at the three health departments are not adequate to deliver the 10 Essential Services.

- **Facilities used by the health departments in Portage County:** There are four facilities used by the health departments in Portage County. The space at each of the locations appears adequate for the current operations of the three health departments, however, it does not appear that any of the facilities could provide room for significant expansion if it was needed.

- **Financial issues relevant to system improvement strategies:** The majority of revenue that supports the health departments in Portage County is generated locally through fees and taxes. Most of these funds are used to deliver mandated environmental health and other services. The health departments receive very little funding to support many of the 10 Essential Services. The funding that is available for the latter is typically from governmental and non-governmental grants that do not provide long-term sustainability for programs such as chronic disease prevention. There may be opportunities to obtain additional funds from health insurers and employers that are interested in working with local health departments to deliver prevention services if health care reform efforts continue to stress the importance of prevention. If a new levy could be passed in Portage County it would generate considerable additional funds that could be used to support the 10 Essential Services. The State of Ohio has also set aside funds for local government agencies that are

considering resource sharing and consolidation arrangements that may be available to local health departments.

- **Legal Issues relevant to system improvement strategies:** Each health department maintains contracts for a variety of services and products. The Kent City Health Department has a collective bargaining agreement that covers four employees. The cities of Kent and Ravenna have specific ordinances related to public health. A legal review of all contracts, agreements, and ordinances would need to be conducted before any realignment or consolidation of health departments could occur.
- **Governance of local health departments in Portage County and Ohio:** The Ohio Revised Code provides a variety of options for local health departments in terms of how they are governed and organized within a county. The options available to the three health departments in Portage County include remaining separate as they currently are; contracting with one another or with other organizations for services; and consolidating two or all three of the health departments.

Task Force Recommendations: After carefully reviewing the information, data, and analysis included in this report, the task force agrees that:

- The public health system in Portage County needs to be strengthened to address emerging health issues that negatively impact the health status of county residents.
- The 10 Essential Public Health Services model is the framework that should guide any efforts to improve and strengthen the public health system.
- Meeting the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) standards should be the measure of success and the goal of the system improvement effort.
- Several possible strategies should be explored by the three health departments in Portage County to determine how best to meet the PHAB standards including

consolidation, contracting with public and/or private organizations for services, and establishing an academic health department relationship with the Kent State University College of Public Health and/or Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED).

The task force hereby recommends that the leadership of the three boards of health:

1. Adopt the 10 Essential Public Health Services model as the framework for developing and implementing a plan to improve the public health system in the county, and that the Essential Services Matrix included in this report (Appendix D) be used to help develop the plan.
2. Commit to pursuing PHAB accreditation within the next five years.
3. Immediately begin discussions among themselves to determine which of the possible strategies to become accredited are most likely to lead to success by using the PHAB standards to assess current capacity to meet them and identify what actions are needed to meet them.
4. After determining the best strategies to become accredited, begin implementing the strategies as quickly as possible.