

► **DIRECT FROM CDC** ENVIRONMENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH TRACKING NETWORK

Jena Losch

Sharing Is Caring: Nurturing the Tracking Network Through Multilevel Partnerships

Editor's Note: As part of our continuing effort to highlight innovative approaches and tools to improve the health and environment of communities, the *Journal* is pleased to publish a bimonthly column from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Environmental Public Health Tracking Network (Tracking Network). The Tracking Network is a system of integrated health, exposure, and hazard information and data from a variety of national, state, and city sources. The Tracking Network brings together data concerning health and environmental problems with the goal of providing information to help improve where we live, work, and play.

Environmental causes of chronic diseases are hard to identify. Measuring amounts of hazardous substances in our environment in a standard way, tracing the spread of these over time and area, seeing how they show up in human tissues, and understanding how they may cause illness is critical. The Tracking Network is a tool that can help connect these efforts. Through these columns, readers will learn about the program and the resources, tools, and information available from CDC's Tracking Network.

The conclusions of this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of CDC.

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From a young age, most of us are taught that teamwork and sharing are important life skills. We foster these skills by playing on sports teams, joining clubs and afterschool activities, sharing our toys with friends and siblings, and working (sometimes begrudgingly) on school group projects. Eventually we move into our professional lives, gathering degrees and becoming experts in our respective fields, and again we are faced with the challenges of teamwork

and sharing. One of the major challenges in public health today is to develop partnerships and build sustainable infrastructure that can deliver vital public health services.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Environmental Public Health Tracking Program (Tracking Program) is a comprehensive environmental health surveillance program that takes surveillance a step further, using data to drive public health action in communities all over

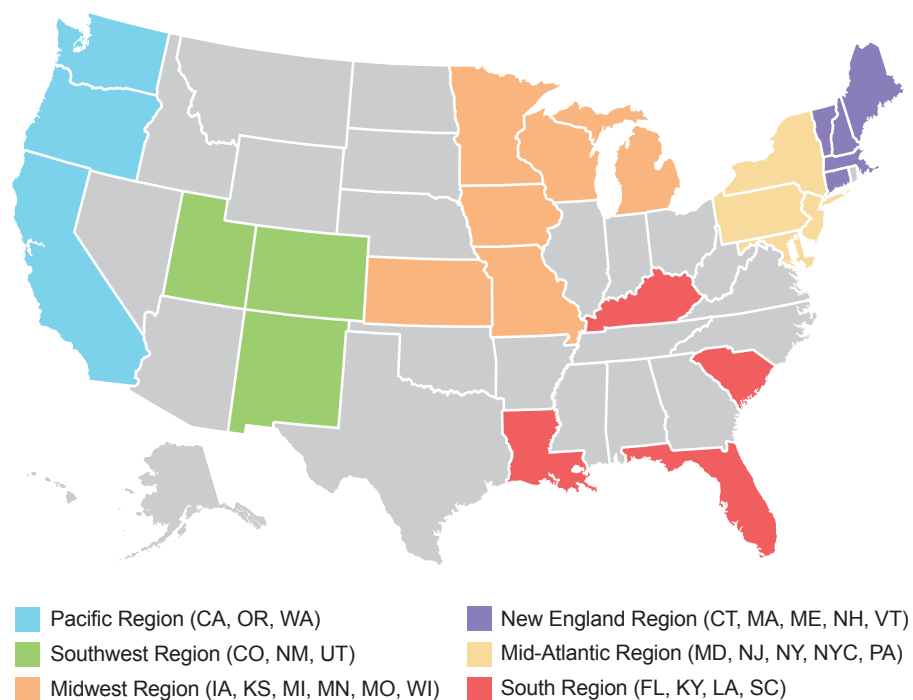
the U.S. Like many public health programs, tracking didn't develop overnight and it has taken the efforts of hundreds of individuals to make it a reality. Three things have contributed to the success of this program: 1) development of a strong multidisciplinary network; 2) creation of productive communication forums to encourage collaboration and the sharing of ideas and resources throughout that network; and 3) connection of individual program initiatives into the larger picture of public health and the environment.

Developing a Strong Program

Although a link between the environment and health is well established historically, many environmental hazards have been monitored separately from the study of health outcomes (McMichael, 1999). In 2000, the Pew Environmental Health Commission urged for the establishment of a nationwide environmental health tracking network that would address this separation and bring information together (Pew Environmental Health Commission, 2000). In 2002, CDC received funding to establish the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program, and began a process of program planning, developing information technology infrastructure, and collaborating with national, state, and local partners. The goal was to create a comprehensive environmental health surveillance system with data from national, state, and city sources, and have this data available for public access. In 2009, CDC launched the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network (Tracking Network), a web-based system of integrated health, exposure, and hazard information and data.

FIGURE 1

The 26 Funded Grantees of the Environmental Public Health Tracking Program Broken Down by Regional Program Marketing and Outreach Workgroups



Supporting the Tracking Network's information systems and data repositories is an equally vital "people network" component that makes the Tracking Program a significant contributor to environmental public health practice. CDC funds 26 state and local health departments to help build the Tracking Program's data sets and create their own state and local networks. In addition, CDC funds several national organizations and collaborates with many other partners to bolster the Tracking Program's capabilities and expand its coverage. The expertise provided by this multidisciplinary collaborative of public health professionals helps to strengthen environmental health practice across the nation.

Having hundreds of people working together toward the same goal has the potential to make a significant impact, but how do you harness the power and expertise of such a large group to the benefit of the collective program?

Utilizing both formal and informal methods of communication, where team members have

a common purpose and all contribute to the group through the sharing of resources and ideas, contributes to program cohesion and better program results (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999). For the Tracking Program, high level, formal communication takes place within three national workgroups: the Content Workgroup, the Standards and Network Development Workgroup, and the Program Marketing and Outreach (PMO) Workgroup. Each of these workgroups consists of semiformal and informal subgroups that cover special topics or projects of interest to the workgroups.

Let's take a closer look at the PMO Workgroup to illustrate how the multilevel approach to collaboration works for the Tracking Program.

Connecting to a Bigger Picture

The PMO Workgroup was created by the Tracking Program in order to bring together CDC staff, grantees, and partners on a regular basis to share ideas and information in order

to increase productivity and maximize awareness of the program. The workgroup provides structure to promote national program goals and help connect individual grantees back into the bigger picture of public health. For example, PMO collects and interprets data and information on key audiences of tracking, strengthens partnerships with national public health programs, and makes recommendations for best practices related to communications and outreach. While this larger workgroup and subgroup structure contributes to the successful performance at a higher program level, it does not adequately address the individual needs of all grantees.

To help support grantees in a more personalized way, PMO instituted a regional group approach. Many times, there are common issues within certain regions of the country. This commonality provides a starting point for better working relationships. Regional approaches to collaboration have been successful in many other public health arenas. For example, public health preparedness programs have a regional approach, as a strong network and dedicated partners are vital to respond to public health emergencies and natural disasters (Koh, Elgura, Judge, & Stoto, 2008).

Small Group Communication: A Regional Approach

The regional PMO groups consist of clusters of three to six grantees and are assigned to one of six geographic regions: Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, New England, Pacific, South, and Southwest (Figure 1). Regional groups offer opportunities for grantees that are located relatively nearby to connect over similar issues and to share information and resources. In a nutshell, they are a social support system for Tracking Program grantees who might be working on similar projects, encountering similar obstacles, or targeting similar audiences. Regional PMO teams are informal, and relationships are strengthened through phone calls, frequent e-mails, and developing a team mentality among the members. Let's take a look at how the Michigan Tracking Program has benefitted from being part of the Midwest regional PMO group.

Michigan, a relatively new state to the Tracking Program, received funding in 2014. Being new has its advantages, such as being able to hear lessons learned from other grantees and jumping into large, well established

workgroups such as PMO. Navigating the steep learning curve of creating a program from scratch, however, can be intimidating. For Michigan, being part of the Midwest regional PMO group has been an important part of their program development. Through the Midwest group, Michigan tracking staff are able to debrief after large PMO group calls, talk openly about issues, and ask for help and tools. The smaller group approach is also useful for sharing more local resources. For example, Michigan wanted to focus communication efforts on preventing carbon monoxide (CO) poisonings. This was mentioned during one of the Midwest group calls and Missouri, a fellow grantee and Midwest member, offered to share the Public Service Announcement videos they created that highlight potential sources of CO, symptoms of CO poisoning, and the importance of CO detectors. Michigan and other states are able to share and promote these videos through social media and publish them on health department Web sites. This sharing of resources helps save money while increasing the impact of existing tools.

The other regional PMO groups have benefited from the smaller team approach as well. Recent topics of discussion include working

with rural health departments (South), monitoring air quality during wildfires (Southwest), discovering sources of CO poisonings (Midwest), addressing environmental justice issues (Pacific), enhancing practice through collaborations (Mid-Atlantic), and subscription-based communication (New England).

Conclusion

Many individuals from local, state, and national organizations have worked together to build the Tracking Program into what you see today. Creating and fostering this multidisciplinary network of people have been important steps toward meeting the vision outlined by the Pew Commission over a decade ago. The development of multilevel partnerships, from large formal workgroups to small informal regional groups, has promoted collaboration and created stronger cohesion throughout the program. As the Tracking Program grows, evolves, and adapts to meet the needs of the communities we serve, we are continually looking for innovative ways to improve how we communicate and work together. Who knew that the kindergarten lesson—sharing is caring—would be so important in advancing the field of environmental public health? 🐾

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Did You Know?

October is Children's Health Month. The environment affects children differently than adults due to differences in behavior and physiology. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's children's environmental health Web site, www.epa.gov/children, provides useful information about children's health, the environment, and what you can do.

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