

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# STRENGTHENING THE PERFORMANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM

**H** *health funders at the national, state, and local levels have made substantial commitments to improve the functionality of the public health system. Using a variety of approaches, they have sought to develop the capabilities, services, and competencies that enhance public health practice. These efforts include developing the operational capacity of public health agencies and raising performance expectations for governmental public health organizations.*

Governmental agencies, such as state and local health departments, serve as the “load-bearing walls” of the nation’s public health system. The strength and effectiveness of these governmental agencies dictate the impact and sustainability of broader public health strategies. Ample documentation suggests, however, that the existing governmental public health infrastructure is inadequate to address health challenges currently facing the nation. Expert assessments have identified numerous pervasive deficiencies in resources and operating capabilities that both compromise agencies’ ability to fulfill traditional roles and responsibilities and undermine efforts to adapt to emerging health threats. Events over the last several years—the appearance of SARS, anthrax attacks, the devastation caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, major recalls of foods and other consumer products, the looming potential of an influenza pandemic, and the growing obesity

epidemic—have underscored the serious, and sometimes tragic, consequences of failing to address these systemic weaknesses.

Such highly visible public health emergencies have resulted in a significant increase in federal public health spending, yet at state and local levels, resources devoted to public health have too often remained stagnant. Cuts in state and local budgets and increasing demands for public health care safety net services have frequently offset increases in federal public health dollars, resulting in little overall progress. Furthermore, federal funding streams for public health largely concentrate on emergency preparedness and other categorical obligations; as a result, federal support for some core services has diminished while other funding streams have increased.

## **Strengthening the Public Health System: Opportunities for Foundation Engagement**

Many opportunities exist for health foundations to broaden the reach and enhance the effectiveness of governmental public health agencies. Such work has potential to yield tremendous returns although the investments require long-term commitments and tolerance for incremental change. They require employing a variety of strategies such as providing leadership, acting as neutral conveners, providing technical assistance, supporting research and assessments, and awarding grants directly to public health agencies.

While funders can pursue a variety of approaches to strengthen the public health system, many have sought to develop capabilities, services, and competencies that truly push the envelope in enhancing public health practice. These philanthropic efforts can be divided into two broad categories: developing the operational capacity of public health agencies and raising performance expectations for governmental public health organizations. Some health funders see these as mutually reinforcing strategies and support both.

Some regions in the country historically have not had any local public health authority, or the existing authorities were extremely limited in nature. Foundations have many opportunities to help build public health capacity in these communities. For example, they can help formalize the role of nongovernmental organizations in providing public health services and strengthen the capacity of local government to partner with nongovernmental organizations and state agencies. This can be done by supporting feasibility studies, disseminating the results, and providing technical assistance. Foundations can also harness momentum and build public will for increased public health capacity by awarding grants for regional convenings and public awareness campaigns.

The effective delivery of public health services depends on timely and reliable information and data. Public health information systems have historically been built

using a silo approach, resulting in a variety of different systems that cannot communicate with each other. A major challenge is to build integrated information systems that get the right information to the right people when they need it.

Foundations can provide considerable resources for public health departments to purchase, update, and utilize information and communications technology. They can also support programs to collect community health information and train public health professionals and others on how to use data to improve knowledge and service delivery.

Another critical issue facing public health is its workforce. Problems include an inadequate number of workers, unevenly prepared and trained professionals, a large number of workers retiring in the near future, and the need for dynamic leaders in the field. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that the public health system is being asked to take on more responsibilities and be prepared for new and emerging health problems with fewer resources. Education and training are critical in building a strong public health workforce. From scholarships for continuing education programs to initiatives developing new schools and training programs, foundations of all sizes can support opportunities for public health professionals to increase their knowledge and skills.

Throughout the country, performance assessment and quality improvement efforts are being ramped up as public health agencies explore ways to increase efficiency and performance. New programs are helping document how resources are being used as well as generating a better understanding of what public health does among policymakers and the public. Performance assessment and accreditation efforts are two examples. Foundations can support these activities in a variety of ways. They can help local health departments become accreditation ready through self-assessments and promotion of quality improvement programs to remedy areas that need improvement. Technical assistance as well as support for training, consultants, convening, and exchange of

practices are specific activities foundations can fund. They can also support health department participation in beta pilot testing for the national accreditation process. Finally, foundations can support the evaluation

of accreditation and quality improvement efforts and then disseminate results to other health departments, the public, and policymakers.