



What's New in Public Health? National Public Health Week Is April 2-8, 2018

Q&A with NACCHO Board President Umair A. Shah, MD, MPH on Using “Hi-Tech” and “Hi-Touch” to Advance Public Health

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, April 3, 2018 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The National Association of County and City Health Departments (NACCHO) represents the nation's nearly 3,000 local governmental health departments. Its mission is to be a leader, partner, catalyst, and voice for local health departments around the nation. In this interview, NACCHO Board President Dr. Umar A. Shah discusses advances in public health as we celebrate National Public Health Week.

Q. Dr. Shah, this year the theme of National Public Health Week is “Changing Our Future Together.” Your local public health department Harris County Public Health (HCPH) has introduced innovative programs around the term “hi-tech” and “hi-touch.” First, what do you mean by these terms?

A. Let's start with “hi-tech.” We believe strongly at our department that we are not building public health of yesterday or today, but rather of tomorrow. We have developed a culture of innovation where staff are encouraged to try new things. We have hired and developed staff members who are not of the typical public health background – for example, NASA is in our backyard and we have not been shy about hiring their former employees. Such people help drive highly innovative projects.

The notion of “hi-touch” then gets to this concept of connectedness and engagement – it is the critical complement to technology. An example is social media. While we use Facebook, Twitter, and the like, as indeed technological tools, they are ultimately for the purpose of engagement. The notion of touching the lives of many others at once – that gets at “hi-touch.”

Q. You began by talking about “hi-tech” projects – can you provide an example of such a “hi-tech” project at your agency?

A. Preventing the spread of Zika has been a priority for our health department. While we have one of the country's [premier mosquito and vector control programs](#), we realized we needed to bolster our mosquito control activities to prevent Zika in our community. An example of our “hi-tech” approach was our first-of-its-kind partnership with Microsoft Research to pilot [“smart” mosquito traps](#) that use infrared technology in identifying Aedes or Culex mosquitoes based on the individual flapping pattern of their wings! While the technology is really cool, it couldn't happen without the people who not only have the expertise, but also a part of a culture that values tackling traditional problems differently.

Q. Dr. Shah, you described the “hi-touch” approach – how was it employed in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, for example?

A. 2017 was certainly busy for local health departments across the country with respect to emergencies – Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria, Nate; wildfires; mass shootings; influenza; etc., all wreaked havoc throughout American communities. I am so incredibly proud of the way local health departments responded in their respective communities – everything from establishing incident command structures to providing support for mass sheltering to ensuring community-wide messaging

– and the list goes on. This is the incredible legacy of what health departments mean to community well-being, safety, and security across our nation.

Hurricane Harvey was such a massive undertaking for impacted communities across Texas. For several weeks, our department took to heart the idea that since our community was essentially transportation-challenged, we had to be “mobile” for it. So, we deployed a fleet of eight large-scale, state-of-the-art RV units into the community. From a mobile mosquito museum to mobile animal wellness and vaccinations, these units were a roving “health village.” We set up shop at grocery stores, places of worship, schools, etc., in an effort to reach into our community. It included all of our core values of health equity, innovation, and certainly engagement – furthering this notion of “hi touch.” Emergencies truly highlight that engaging our communities is a priority for public health.

Q. How can other local health department replicate your success?

A. We must build upon what other agencies, and not necessarily public health agencies, have done to be successful in serving their communities’ needs. This means we must have a different mindset – a private sector approach to public sector issues. Not forgetting what makes us uniquely different in our mission to “do good,” but to adapt and adopt from others.

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