



Preventing & Responding to Disease Outbreaks

Tuberculosis

This fall, King County had nineteen cases of tuberculosis (TB). These cases led to large scale contact investigations after more than 300 individuals were exposed. Public Health – Seattle & King County immediately approached the places where TB exposure took place and organized prompt evaluation of those who had been exposed. These evaluations include a series of clinical tests that include such things like TB skin tests, chest x-rays and/or blood tests. If someone is diagnosed with TB infection, but not active (contagious) TB, a 3-9 month course of preventative medication is generally required to stop the spread of disease.

There are an estimated 100,000 people in King County with latent TB infection, which is not contagious, but can progress to active TB disease if untreated. One in 10 individuals with latent TB infection will develop active TB disease. Yet, because of shrinking resources Public Health – Seattle & King County, can no longer track or oversee these people with latent TB infection to ensure appropriate medical follow ups and treatment that will stop them from developing active TB and thus interrupt the spread of disease in the community.

Curbing the Spread of Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Snohomish County's syphilis rates have increased 123% in one year, but the local health department does not have the staff or resources to do more than triage high-risk cases after they have been reported. Additionally, more than 1,700 Chlamydia cases reported this year have gone unchecked. With additional state funding, Snohomish County Public Health will increase response and prevention efforts. Many local health departments around the state face the same lack of capacity for partner notification and, as a result, are seeing increased STD rates – for example, King County's syphilis rate has nearly doubled in the last decade. The situation in Benton and Franklin Counties is even worse, with a 150% increase in Gonorrhea cases in just the last year.

Disease Response in Underfunded Departments Leaves Other Work Undone

In the Northeast Corner of our state, lack of funding and the resulting staff shortages have caused the Northeast Tri County Health District to triage disease investigations – with some going un-investigated. During the summer months of 2016, the health department had to prioritize investigation for human and animal exposures to potentially rabid bats. As a result, reports of food and waterborne illnesses were delayed or were not completed.

For more information, please contact the Washington State Public Health Association at info@wspha.org.