

Issue Brief – State Epidemiologist

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH / EPIDEMIOLOGY AND LABORATORY SERVICES

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SUMMARY

One of the key responsibilities of the Division of Epidemiology and Laboratory Services (ELS) is to “work with and for other state, local and private entities to identify and epidemiologically characterize communicable diseases, human health effects of environmental health hazards and occupational risks of public health concern and to develop and coordinate public health systems. Recent media attention to a potential pandemic of avian flu has heightened the awareness of this responsibility. More prevalent and serious public health threats include tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases (STD), West Nile Virus and hepatitis to mention only a few. The state epidemiologist identifies and coordinates efforts to both prevent and manage the efforts to reduce the risk in the event of an outbreak. The position is a medical physician with specific training in infectious disease and the study of the distribution of diseases and health patterns.

OBJECTIVE

State funding will need to be identified for the position of State Epidemiologist if the position is to be continued into the next fiscal year.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The State Epidemiologist to date has been a federally funded employee. Since 2001, the position has been filled by direct assistance provided by the Federal Center for Disease Control (CDC) on a temporary basis through the Prevention Block Grant, which has been cut significantly.

The State Epidemiologist is required to coordinate and work with the local health departments. Of the 12 local health departments, 10 do not have a physician health officer. The lack of a senior level, physician-trained State Epidemiologist could jeopardize medical responses and decision making at both the local level and the state level. This increases the state-wide risk.

Two critical challenges facing the State if an epidemiologist is not funded are:

- the loss of ability to promptly and accurately identify and respond to infectious disease outbreaks and public health threats.
- the state’s inability to mount an effective response to emerging infectious, bioterrorism and other serious health threats, such as those posed in the last three years by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), West Nile Virus infection or an outbreak of meningococcal disease or to future threats such as a pandemic influenza or a bio-terrorism attack.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

Funding for the position of a State Epidemiologist would require an ongoing General Fund appropriation of \$210,000. This would be a replacement of Federal Funds.

If the Health and Human Services Appropriations Subcommittee would like to fund this position, the Subcommittee would have to place the funding request on a building block priority list to be forwarded to Executive Appropriations Committee for additional ongoing General Fund.