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## **Public Health is a Key Component in Improving Healthcare**

Next to the economy, the area of largest concern to most Americans is healthcare. The new Administration has promised to tackle both of these issues, but improving the nation's health system will require the participation of both the private and the public sectors. Success in this endeavor will require public health to play a critical role.

Throughout our history, public health has made tremendous strides in food safety, occupational safety, motor vehicle safety, control of infectious diseases, vaccination, fluoridation of water, infant and maternal health, and modifying behavior to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. Public health works to protect and improve the health of a community through preventive medicine, health education, control of communicable diseases, application of sanitary measures, and monitoring of environmental hazards. These efforts must be continued and even expanded.

Although we spend more on healthcare than any other country, we continue to lag behind in a number of health indicators. According to UNICEF, the U.S. ranked 89<sup>th</sup> in infant mortality, far behind countries like Spain, Sweden, New Zealand, and Italy. In fact, a baby born in the U.S. is 3 times more likely to die before the age of 5 than in some developing countries. 8% of babies born in the U.S. will have a low birth weight, while 4% of babies born in Poland, Norway and the Ukraine weigh more at birth. Further, the prevalence of HIV in American adults is twice as high as the rates in both Canada and Mexico; the U.S. is included in the list of the top ten countries with the highest number of people infected with HIV or AIDS.

The successful reform of our healthcare system will require a robust public health system to prevent disease, injury, and disability while promoting wellness and improving the nation's health. Public health will remain crucial in a number of arenas. One example is the promotion of environmental health, such as lead poisoning prevention programs. Another area of involvement for public health professionals is the promotion and encouragement of healthy behaviors in an effort to address social concerns such as teen violence and suicide, substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and teen pregnancies. Public health officials are also responsible for the monitoring of certain disease trends, providing public immunization clinics, sponsoring health screenings, and enforcing health and safety codes in housing, businesses, and public places such as schools, restaurants, hotels, public pools, and day care facilities. Public health departments also warn the public and health care providers about possible health threats such as the recall of tainted food products and the spread of

contagious diseases, and they are integral in the development of a plan of action to contain and combat the threat. Educating the public about health and safety concerns is another component of public health. And in the event of a disaster, whether man-made or natural, it is the role of public health officials to respond and assist communities in their recovery by providing on-site assistance,

crisis counseling, setting up shelters, overseeing sanitation, food and water supplies, and monitoring the incidence of illness and injury.

Public health is a multi-faceted discipline that affects every person from birth until death. With its emphasis on the prevention of disease and the promotion of health of communities and populations at risk, public health is uniquely qualified to play a major role in the reform of our healthcare system. During public health week, April 6<sup>th</sup> through April 12<sup>th</sup>, the American Public Health Association is stressing the important role of public health in “building the foundation for a healthy America.” The Central Connecticut Health District invites the public to learn more about this issue, and has information available at the main office located at 505 Silas Deane Highway in Wethersfield as well as on its website: [www.ccthd.org](http://www.ccthd.org). The Health District may also be reached at 860-721-2822.