



Cowlitz County Health Department

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News Release

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Washington State Department of Health Budget Cuts Affect Local Health Department

"We are sorry to be losing dedicated employees and important programs," said Cowlitz County Health and Human Services Director, Carlos Carreon, "but most of all we regret the fact that our ability to prevent disease and promote health has diminished."

Among the cuts is the SNAPed program or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education in which a health educator works directly with children and families receiving federal food assistance to make healthy food choices, an important tool in the addressing the epidemic of childhood obesity. Funds to address tobacco use among youth and adults have also been largely cut representing another major blow to disease prevention activities.

Public health services for individuals have also been cut. Effective January 28th, 2011, services that will be eliminated or reduced include the following:

- Testing for Tuberculosis (TB), HIV and sexually transmitted infections will no longer be available except to certain high risk individuals.
- Pregnancy testing and emergency contraception will no longer be offered.
- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Tobacco Education

The Health Department will continue to investigate serious communicable diseases like infectious tuberculosis and E. coli, but responses to other reportable infections will be streamlined due to lack of staff. "As of early February, we will have lost half of our public health nurses to budget cuts," explained Dr. Jennifer Vines, MD, MPH, Deputy Health Officer, "so we simply will not be able to respond as quickly to communicable disease reports or potential outbreaks."

Carlos Carreon, Director, stated, "It is an understatement to say that we are going through some difficult transitions. Public health, nationally and at the state level, has been going through cuts that have affected not only the people working in public health, but how public health is being thought of in these economically challenging times. Locally we have been making the transition from individual practice to population based over the last four years. The transition has not always been easy but it has put us in a position where we could absorb the cuts that came down to us without losing line staff. Our elimination of the Deputy Director in 2007 gave us a respite from the staff reductions that were affecting all the rest of our sister agencies throughout the state. Unfortunately, the cuts that have happened to us recently have affected good people doing good work, as well as those of us who are left to continue on."

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Unfortunately, staff cuts could not be avoided. A total of seven positions will be eliminated early February, due to the cutbacks in State funding. The positions are: Office Assistant, Epidemiologist, (2) Health Educators, (2) Public Health Nurses, Secretary.

Programs that are anticipated to continue for the foreseeable future include Children with Special Health Care Needs that provides public health nurse case management for medically fragile children and environmental health inspections that help to ensure clean water, proper waste disposal, and good food handling hygiene practices at local food service establishments.

For Cowlitz County citizens who may have any questions about receiving services no longer offered by the health department, please contact your primary health care provider. For more information about the Cowlitz County Health Department, please go to <http://www.co.cowlitz.wa.us/health>.

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