

South Carolina establishes a new community engagement coordinator position



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South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control Bureau of Communicable Disease Prevention and Control hired a new position, a community engagement coordinator to more holistically address the issues and needs of community members and population groups disproportionately impacted by health disparities.



The “What”

Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) funding has allowed the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control Bureau of Communicable Disease Prevention and Control (BCDPC) to hire a new position, a community engagement coordinator. The position works across the five program-specific divisions of BCDPC to more holistically address issues and needs that community members and population groups disproportionately impacted by health disparities experience instead of focusing on the communicable disease conditions alone.

There are five divisions in BCDPC: Acute Disease Epidemiology; sexually transmitted diseases (STD)/HIV and Viral Hepatitis; Tuberculosis (TB) Control; Immunizations; and Surveillance, Assessment and Evaluation. These divisions generally have separate funding streams that largely dictate focusing on disease conditions. The coordinator was hired to represent BCDPC’s central office programs in ongoing community engagement and eventually become a trusted community contact focusing not on disease conditions, but instead on social determinants of health that fuel the health disparities we see for communicable diseases and other health conditions.



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The “So What”

The position was filled in October 2022, and the following successes have been undertaken by the new community engagement coordinator:

- Chairs new group meetings of BCDPC health educators from STD/HIV and Viral Hepatitis, Immunizations, and TB. The program health educators previously planned outreach and education activities separately focusing on initiatives addressing only the conditions for their programs even though the separate interventions often touch the same populations. This new position helps work towards jointly planning outreach and interventions.
- Represents the central office BCDPC programs in routine outreach meetings, meetings of the Public

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Health Regional Community Systems Directors, and social worker meetings. These groups work more closely with community members and community-based organizations than central office programs typically do. Participation in these meetings identifies opportunities for BCDPC programs to look more broadly and integrate program-specific work with community initiatives and better address social determinants of health.

- Developed tools to interview community members about what they are proud of, and what they are concerned about in their communities. They used the tool on a small scale to conduct brief interviews at a health fair to engage with community members and learn more about how their priorities may differ from priorities our programs establish. In this small project they also supervised Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) student volunteers to assist with the interviews. This supported a service-learning project for the HBCU students and also created another opportunity to engage with them as members of disproportionately impacted minority communities.
- Assisted in organizing and facilitating a series of four focus groups convened to ask gay and bisexual African-American men for their input about infographics and educational tools we had developed about mpox. The goal of the focus groups was to modify or develop additional outreach tools to more effectively reach those at highest risk for mpox to change behaviors to prevent exposures and increase mpox vaccination coverage.

The “Now What”

Achieving effective community engagement is a long process. It must involve dedicated representatives of BCDPC programs to have ongoing engagement with people living in communities of high social vulnerability to eventually build trusting relationships with health department staff. ELC funding provides the opportunity to support a position to function in this unique role. The position has fostered efficiency and cross-department coordination to support education and outreach across diseases. BCDPC plans for the

community engagement coordinator to build an understanding of the challenges that community members experience and learn more about their priorities by developing a lasting and meaningful relationship with community members. Starting initially small with the intent to grow ongoing interactions we will use community input to frame our activities, that are typically planned without community input, to become better positioned to holistically address issues and needs and more effectively perform health promotion and disease prevention and control interventions.

Key contributors to this project Christine Williams and Katie Waites, both with the South Carolina Department of Health & Environmental Control.