

Collaboration strengthens infectious disease prevention/response capacity in Vermont nursing homes



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CATEGORY: **Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC)**

The Vermont Department of Health collaborated with the Vermont Department of Aging and Independent Living to empower skilled nursing facilities to implement best practices to prevent and mitigate COVID-19 infections.



The “What”

From the very beginning of the pandemic, nursing home residents made up a very large portion of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths. The skilled nursing sector in Vermont is a diverse one that was presented with many challenges, including varying levels of resources and of staff size and skill levels. Maintaining staffing was particularly challenging. As guidance changed frequently throughout the pandemic and facilities experienced large staffing strains, the Vermont Department of Health faced a challenge in ensuring that best practices to prevent and mitigate COVID-19 infections and outbreaks were implemented. Facilities required additional support with guidance and supplies.

Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) funding helped ensure that skilled nursing facilities (SNFs) had necessary support, supplies, and guidance for testing and other infection control. ELC funding also enabled the Health Department’s sister department within the Agency of Human Services, the Department of Aging and Independent Living (DAIL), to hire two staff that were integrated into the Health Department’s healthcare outbreak prevention and response teams. The teams assisted skilled nursing and other facilities with effective implementation of infection prevention and control practices to prevent the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 after facility exposure while enabling the facilities’ clinical services to continue safely.



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SUBMITTED JUNE 2023

From the start of the pandemic response, both the Vermont Department of Health and DAIL have provided technical assistance to SNFs during response calls which are held at the identification of a new situation (e.g., a single case in a facility) and routinely thereafter to assess and update response plans. There are areas of overlap in this interdepartmental collaboration, as well as areas of specialty. The DAIL team focuses on personal protective equipment (PPE) and staffing capacity to support the clinical services these facilities provide. These two staff will assume the COVID-19 technical assistance responsibilities that are currently covered by temporarily deployed staff from other DAIL divisions.

The teams provided support for over 500 outbreaks in skilled nursing, long-term care, and other related care facilities, and saw a much lower rate of COVID-19 deaths than other states.

The “So What”

Vermont has a centralized Health Department, with twelve local health offices that were each able to hire a COVID-19 epidemiologist. While Health Department epidemiologists initially provided a wide range of services to care facilities that were experiencing outbreaks, such as dealing with supply and staffing issues, the funding and related support enabled the Department’s epidemiologists and DAIL’s own specialists to cover the domains that they were best suited for. Epidemiologists were able to provide disease-specific guidance from the Health Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and conduct epidemiological surveillance, while DAIL staff provided logistical support around supplies, staffing, and incorporating Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) guidance. The teams provided support for over 500 outbreaks in skilled nursing, long-term care, and other related care facilities, and saw a much lower rate of COVID-19 deaths than other states.

ELC funding helped ensure that Vermont’s nursing facilities were able to access and successfully employ test kits, other testing support, and outbreak/infection prevention and control guidance. The funding, and the strengthened Health Department/DAIL collaboration that funding supported, enabled the successful transition to a model where facilities still have significant COVID support, but to an extent that is sustainable for the Health Department and enables infectious disease epidemiology staff to focus on their scope of work.

The “Now What”

Vermont’s nursing home DAIL support staff, along with Vermont Department of Health local health COVID-19 epidemiologists and other staff within the Health Department’s Central Office are working with Vermont facilities on improved infection prevention plans. This focused and successful record of collaboration between facilities and the relevant areas of state government has strengthened the ongoing relationships within this particularly high-need and high-priority sector which the state is leveraging for the control of other diseases.

Key contributors to this project include Vermont Department of Health – Infectious Disease Epidemiology; Vermont Department of Health – Office of Local Health; Department of Aging and Independent Living.