

Public Health Departments Recognized for Significant Contributions to Their Communities

Topeka- The annual Kansas Association of Counties (KAC) conference will be held November 12-14 in Wichita. Traditionally, local government officials are recognized for their service, achievements, and commitment to public service at the conference's award luncheon. This year, local public health officials will be added to the list of recognitions.

Public health is one of the primary responsibilities of county government. Local public health departments across the state focus on improving health outcomes for all by providing services such as immunizations, nutrition assistance for pregnant and nursing mothers and their young children, disease investigation and surveillance, emergency preparedness, home health, and enforcement of state and local public health laws.

“Often public health is one of those ‘invisible’ public services; you don’t hear much about it when things are going well. But in times of crises, such as disease outbreaks or emergencies, we count on our public health officials to keep us safe. I think it’s important that we take the time to recognize this important work and raise awareness of these vital services among policy makers and the general public,” said Michelle Ponce, executive director of the Kansas Association of Local Health Departments (KALHD).

The specific award categories and criteria were chosen by staff from KALHD and KAC, and judging panels were comprised of board representatives from both organizations. Funding for the awards was provided by the Kansas Health Foundation.

- *Public Health Champion: Larry Franken.* Dr. Franken serves as the Chief Epidemiologist at the Wyandotte County Health Department. In that role, he has pioneered initiatives to ensure information sharing among KC Metro area public health, emergency preparedness, and academic organizations; implemented a quality improvement program for the health department; and provides education to underserved populations about the importance of prevention and treatment of communicable disease.
- *Department of the Year: Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department.* The department has made significant contributions to the public health system through innovation, community engagement activities, and its focus on continuous quality improvement. Specific achievements include, but are not limited to, creation of the state’s first Academic Health Department through partnership with the University of Kansas Center for Research; coordinating a 175-member community health coalition, LiveWell Lawrence; and receipt of a national Model Practice Award for its child care licensing program. Additionally, the department is in the process of achieving national accreditation.
- *Local Public Health County of the Year: Riley County.* The county has demonstrated a strong partnership between the local public health department and members of the



local Board of Health, as well as efforts of county department staff and policy makers working together to engage community members in health improvement activities. Since February 2014, the department and county commissioners have held formal Board of Health meetings; worked together to conduct a Local Public Health System Assessment; and have implemented multiple initiatives to engage community members in health improvement activities, such as policy changes to ensure healthy vending and concessions, evidence-based child care protocols, and older adult exercise programs.

“There is so much work being done across the state to protect and improve the health of Kansans, “ said Fern Hess, KALHD Board President. “These awards provide an opportunity to not only recognize those achievements but, even more importantly, to share the successes so that they can be built upon.”

In addition to the formal awards, Johnson County Department of Health and Environment and the Sedgwick County Health Department will be recognized for being the first and second, respectively, local health departments in Kansas to achieve national accreditation through the Public Health Accreditation Board.

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