

4 Building Relationships and Working Groups

Local public health departments are important partners when Centers for independent Living (CILs) focus on improving health equity for those with disabilities. Many communities have found ways to partner with public health departments to improve the accessibility of vaccination programs, public-facing services, and disaster response. This is accomplished through shared goals, mutual understanding, and respect for cultural differences. As well, effective communication and trust are precursors to sustainable relationships.

For these workbooks, the term “public health departments” refers to traditional public health agencies or departments funded and managed through city, county or state government, as well as nonprofit or private organizations that provide services in the form of clinical health services, public health vaccines, or mental or behavioral health services.

The ways in which state and local governments organize and fund public health systems and deliver public health services vary across and within states. This includes the agency or organization tasked with carrying out all or some of the public health functions. In some states, the local public health department is an

extension of the state public health agency. In other states, local public health departments are funded and managed by the city or county. Organizations external to the local public health department may also provide community health, clinical, behavioral or mental health services in an area. In that case, these external organizations should not only be seen as a critical partner in planning and responding to disaster, but also a key partner in improving health equity day-to-day.

Initial Approach and Outreach

As your organization works to learn more about the public health department operating in the community, remember that those working there may have limited information about, awareness of, or expertise in working with the disability community. Do not assume the same broad understanding of disability issues that may be present among other community or government partners. Recognize this as an opportunity to educate others about disability. This can be done through technical assistance, information sharing, etc. Below are examples of steps you can take toward initial approach and outreach:

- Research the government entities and organizations providing public health services in local area.

- Identify the right person or position most likely to engage in new partnership.
- Make sure the health department provides the contact information for the appropriate point of contact with the department. Sometimes health department staff may not understand your organization's mission, structure, activities or know how to contact the "right" individual. Sharing this information with the health department will help connect them with the right person.
- Be able to articulate proposed activities and anticipated benefits from collaboration or partnership.
- Obtain buy-in and support for public health partnership or workgroup activities and goals from your organization's leadership.
- Be flexible, patient, and understanding as new partners work to better understand how to assess accessibility, provide accommodations, and ensure inclusion.
- Recognize an opportunity to be a resource and expert on disability and help to educate others.

Articulate Value

Due to limited experience in life or work or limited capacity at work, public health personnel may not immediately see the full spectrum of benefits that result from partnering with disability stakeholders. Therefore, it is important that disability stakeholders clearly articulate the diverse resources and expertise they bring to the table. In many ways, CILs have connections and access to resources beyond that of health departments with local or regional jurisdictions. CILs have earned the trust of stakeholders and have built connections with organizations focused on specific topics, local or regional peer networks, and local community leadership.

Do any of these resonate with you?

- Provide expertise in the areas of accessible communications, accessibility.
- Leverage connections to diverse community networks, such as accessible transportation providers, translators/interpreters.
- Serve as “force multiplier” in the community by promoting preparedness awareness and education to a network of clients and partners.
- Respond as a partner by hosting health clinics, vaccination sites, facilitating connection with clients.

- Assist with review, development, or delivery of disability awareness training.
- Solicit volunteers among clients or staff to participate in an emergency management exercise and serve as “actors” who play disaster victims in the scenario.
- Participate in and support health promotion interventions for the whole community (not as a special targeted subgroup; all public health interventions should include disability partners).

What other ways can your organization be a valuable partner to local public health departments?

Challenges and Opportunities

Working with government entities such as local health departments can present challenges that may result in progress that is slower or more narrowly focused than passionate stakeholders may desire. Consider the following factors and how they might impact a workgroup’s ability to move initiatives down the road.

Identify the “Right Person”

It can be hard to identify and/or connect with the individual in the public health department who is in the position to represent historical context, commit resources, or have authority to make decisions.

It is important to research the public health department to identify leadership and those working in the areas of emergency preparedness, health equity, or vaccine delivery.

Consider the following steps:

- Review the public health department website.
- Search for previous presentations on public health preparedness in your area and identify the presenter and sponsoring organization.
- Ask other community organizations or partnering agencies about previous collaborations with the public health departments and ask for an introduction.
- Attend public local fairs, conferences, or workshops hosted by the local emergency management office or public health preparedness personnel.

- Follow your local emergency management office and public health department on social media and subscribe to any newsletters or distribution listservs.

Make Use of Extended Timelines

Extended timelines may be discouraging for those new to community workgroups, but there are also advantages. “Shovel ready” projects have most of the resources in place, but may lack one or two items, such as funding or final approval, before they can be implemented. Here are some best practices to secure funding:

- Name short, medium, and long-term goals.
- Identify “shovel ready” projects that can serve as the focus of short- or medium-term goals.
- Work across topic areas so that something is always being accomplished.
- Use the extended timeline to let relationships develop, diverse talents emerge, and good ideas to solidify.

Identify the Decision-Making Authorities

Decision-making authority may be concentrated at the top levels of the organization and not among staff who attend the meetings.

Consider the following steps when navigating this challenge:

- Approach a partnership with the public health department from multiple angles in order to secure department leadership buy-in from the beginning.
- Connect with public health department leadership.
- Clearly establish scope of authority in early stages of the relationship.
- Confirm with the invited attendees the scope of their responsibilities and next steps.
- Be clear about your expectations and confirm you have the “right person.” Determine if additional action is warranted to obtain a necessary level of approval from the public health department.

Acknowledge Limited Funds and Restricted Budgets

Public health departments, like other governmental entities, often operate with limited or restricted budgets and are subject to limitations on what and how

they spend funds. Grant funding is often tied to specific projects and deliverables with decisions about project activities being made months or years in advance of implementation.

Personnel are often limited in how they can spend funds. Here are some best practices to secure funding:

- Partner with public health departments and other community organizations to strengthen grant applications.
- Secure funding from more diverse sources.
- Share the work and the rewards while strengthening relationships and networks and building trust and ultimately more community resilience, for example.

Understand the Political Environment

Political environments can impact interest in certain topics. It may be necessary to frame an issue as it relates to people with disabilities. Consider these steps:

- Gather input about experiences or unique needs of people with disabilities using surveys, focus groups, or other means that are accessible and appropriate for customers or clients.

- Document information about unique or unmet needs and other ways that people with disabilities are impacted.
- Use this information to reframe policy issues or to adapt current activities to be more inclusive of the disability community.

Build Trust

As with any workgroup, some level of trust is required for group members to engage in productive discussions and achieve progress towards goals. Consider the following steps to build trust:

- Follow through on commitments made to workgroup members.
- Engage in discussions in a respectful and appropriate manner.
- Recognize the limitations and challenges of providing public health services to the community.
- Practice understanding, compassion, and constructive feedback if mistakes are made during the accommodation process (for example, when outdated terms are used, etc.).

Other ways to build trust among workgroup partners include:

How can you build trust among workgroup partners?

Strategies for Sustained Engagement

Besides preparedness and response, identify ways that public health departments, CILs, and other disability-led organizations (DLOs) can partner together to promote health equity among people with disabilities. If public health departments and DLOs have a working partnership in other public health areas prior to a disaster, certain relationships and communication strategies will already be established. Public health departments are typically funded in the following topics or areas of focus:

- Injury prevention
- Maternal health
- Mental health
- Obesity and nutrition
- Physical activity
- Routine vaccines, (for flu, shingles, tetanus, pneumococcal disease, etc.)

- Sexual health
- Smoking cessation
- Substance or opioid abuse
- Violence and domestic abuse prevention

Identify other established community programs/partnerships that may have programs in these areas. Those organizations may be able to provide an introduction to the local health department, or offer advice. Sustained engagement with public health departments needs to be based on interactive and mutually beneficial relationships.

Use the following three form fields to identify potential areas for relationship building and collaboration:

My CIL and other organizations that I know value relationships with public health departments for the following reasons (fill in the form fields below for the three examples):

Relationship value 1

Relationship value 2

Relationship value 3

Other Supporting and Mutually Beneficial Relationships

Public health departments and CILs are two of several resources with common goals and missions related to equity, health, safety, independence, resilience, and well-being for people with disabilities. Finding and connecting with other government agencies, community-based organizations, advocacy and inclusion stakeholders, small businesses, and corporate allies in your community creates a community of practice that includes both the public and private sectors.

When agencies, organizations, and corporations work towards a common goal, the benefits are compounded and include the following:

- Consumers and communities receive a common, consistent, and clear message.
- Agencies reduce rather than replicate workloads.
- Existing ideas and strategies are improved, and new ideas are generated.

- Public health departments can better support their jurisdiction.
- Other community organizations or members are inspired to engage in shared goals.

Each community is unique. Building meaningful relationships in your own community will be influenced by who is in your community. What are the community leaders' and members' goals, roles, and responsibilities? Who has similar goals?

There are some agencies and organizations that exist in every jurisdiction.

These existing and potential community relationships are a good place to start.

Examples of potential partner agencies that are in every state are included below.

Complete the table with your local information for these and other potential partners:

Agency/ Organization/ Community Group	Contact Information	Disability or Disaster Related Goals/Pillars	Areas of Common Interest

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