



COMMISSIONER'S COMMENTS



Public Health, By the Numbers and From A to Z

Some may wonder exactly what public health involves. Frankly, a better question might be what is it that public health doesn't do.

The Putnam County Department of Health has restaurant inspectors, public health nurses, an epidemiologist and public health physician, sanitarians, engineers, nutritionists, program planners and evaluators, and health educators. These professionals frequently work under the radar to ensure your health and well-being. When they are effective, disease and illness are kept at bay and health initiatives safeguard the public.

I am reminded of a conversation I had during my medical training with a friend who was studying public health. I was feeling quite pleased with myself after completing a lifesaving operation. He provided an insight that has stuck with me until today—more lives have been saved over the last century from good public health practices than all the surgeries ever performed! Although his comments were somewhat deflating, it remains as true today as it was then. Countless epidemics have been averted with the simple understanding that polluted water and improper waste disposal spread diseases.

Public health saves money and lives. Illness is averted before it starts. Screenings ensure early treatment often before symptoms arise, yielding better results for patients. Education about healthier lifestyles helps residents live more fulfilling lives. By carefully disposing of e-waste, household hazardous waste and unused medication, both the environment and personal health are preserved. Last year 260,000 pounds of e-waste, 7,100 pounds of household hazardous waste and 1,100 pounds of prescription and over-the-counter medicine were properly discarded with the help of the Putnam County Health Department. Public water systems were monitored and potential threats from septic system malfunctions addressed. Additionally, 335 food establishments in the county were inspected and 164 food operators received free training in safe practices to prevent food-borne illnesses.

In 2012, the health department immunized approximately 5,000 residents for flu, minimizing its impact in the county. Our youngest residents are further protected

by identifying lead poisoned children, treating them and remediating the cause. Annual camp inspections also provide safe recreational facilities for our children.

What about emergency preparedness? The health department staff train and drill continuously to be ready to respond to any potential catastrophe.

The scope of duties performed by health department staff is eye-opening. We are out protecting and serving the public each and every day. So this April, if you have the opportunity, please thank a public health worker during National Public Health Week —especially our Putnam County Department of Health workers.

Dr. Allen Beals is commissioner of the Putnam County Health Department.