



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The History of Public Health in Northeast Colorado

Sterling, Colo. – April 2, 2021: The week of April 5-11, 2021 is designated as National Public Health Week. You may wonder, “What is public health?” It’s the science of protecting and improving the health of people and their communities. Northeast Colorado Health Department (NCHD) is your local public health department. And since it can be fun to learn about the history of things, we would like to take this opportunity to walk down memory lane and learn more about public health in northeast Colorado.

NCHD was formally established on January 1, 1948. Initially there were only five participating Counties of Logan, Morgan, Phillips, Sedgwick and Yuma, with Washington County joining shortly afterward. Washington County later withdrew from the public health district and was absent for a little over 13 years rejoining a second time in 1973. Since that time NCHD has consistently served the six county region that covers an estimated 9,200 square miles, similar in size to the state of Vermont. NCHD is governed by a local Board of Health comprised of eight members including a County Commissioner from each of the participating Counties and two additional representatives from each of the more populous Counties (Logan and Morgan).

A gift of money was made by Ira J. Taylor of Paoli, Colorado in August, 1972 to construct and equip a new building for NCHD at 700 Columbine Street in Sterling which continues to be the regional headquarters for the public health district.

Primary work initially undertaken by the newly formed public health district included conducting a sanitation survey, giving aid to Polio victims, providing health education to combat venereal disease, organizing speech clinics, initiating a tuberculosis control program, improving maternity programming and under the Crippled Children's Service providing clinics where children and adults were examined by a bone specialist.

Communicable diseases reported within the six county region between 1948 and 1959 included influenza, mumps, measles, chicken pox, scarlet fever, meningitis, diphtheria, pneumonia and brucellosis. Many of these diseases are now preventable with immunizations. In February 1958, the NCHD Board of Health adopted rules and regulations to govern a uniform permit system for eating and drinking establishments. The permit system was deemed to bring better protection for the public as well as the restaurant operators. NCHD began offering Polio vaccine clinics in the 1960s.

A Disaster Preparedness Conference held on March 9, 1967 at NCHD's Sterling office initiated preparedness planning by public health in northeast Colorado. Today, NCHD has an emergency response plan in place and the plan is exercised and used during public health emergencies such as environmental disasters, pandemics, etc. There have been several responses by NCHD. In August, 2012, a case of Anthrax was identified at a ranch in Logan County. Anthrax can develop naturally in the soil and animals most susceptible include cattle, sheep, horses and goats. Humans or animals can become infected by coming into contact with infected animals, soil or water. While

the Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA) conducted an investigation and remediated animal exposures with the livestock owner, NCHD performed a public health investigation to ensure that any people at risk for a possible exposure to the anthrax received treatment. In September, 2013, a flood occurred that affected four of the six counties served by NCHD. And most recently, NCHD's response to COVID-19 included public information, contact tracing, case investigation, outbreak investigations, testing and vaccinations.

There were several milestones in the 1970s with NCHD offering Well Oldsters Clinics and Well Child Clinics, providing health education around pre-marriage tests, and conducting Swine Flu Shot Clinics. NCHD also conducted a Strep Control Program. And in 1970, Pat W. Freeburg, laboratory director at NCHD received and oversaw a study grant from the Colorado Heart Association regarding a rapid fluorescent antibody technique for identification of group A Streptococci or strep throat. This newer, faster method of processing throat cultures for group A Streptococci was a breakthrough in laboratory time, providing quicker test results back to the physician and patient resulting in quicker treatment, and decreasing the number of cases of Rheumatic fever. Rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease were almost always preceded by a 'Strep' infection.

During the 1980s and 1990s, several NCHD programs were impacted by funding cuts including Migrant Health, Stream Water Testing, Food Sanitation Testing, Prenatal Care, Maternity Care, Home Health Care, Zoonosis Control, Crippled Children's Program, and Well Child Clinics. At the same time, NCHD added the chickenpox vaccine to the list of immunizations provided by the department and began offering confidential HIV services. Later, in 2003, smallpox vaccinations were conducted and in 2009, H1N1 flu was tackled.

There have been fifteen Public Health Directors since NCHD's formation in 1948, providing leadership to the public health efforts across northeast Colorado. Today, NCHD offers over fifty environmental health and safety programs, nursing services, and health promotion and prevention programs. As we celebrate National Public Health Week, NCHD continues to be committed to its mission to protect health and inspire prevention by promoting healthy behaviors, protecting against environmental hazards and preventing injury and disease for the residents of northeast Colorado.

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