

**RWJF Grant ID#:** 70624

**Team Name:** Horizon Public Health

**Major Activities:** The Horizon Community Health Board<sup>1</sup> (CHB) was formed in 2011 as the single governing entity for the health departments serving the counties of Douglas, Pope, Stevens, Traverse and Grant. At the time, the Douglas County health department and the health department serving Stevens, Traverse and Grant Counties shared a health director; Pope County had a health department with its own director. The formation of the Horizon CHB was the first step to develop a more effective and efficient means of providing public health services in all five counties. The Horizon CHB appointed a Restructuring Committee in January 2012 to pursue whether full integration of the three local health departments (LHDs) would fulfill their desire to assure the future presence and stability of a robust public health infrastructure for all five counties and, if so, to develop a transition plan for full implementation. The health directors served as co-leaders of the Committee, and ultimately implemented a newly integrated entity known as “Horizon Public Health.”

At the outset, the co-leaders conducted a “listening tour” with each county’s board of commissioners in order to understand specific concerns, answer questions, and provide a status report of progress to date. Additionally, a professionally-facilitated retreat held for the 75 staff from the three LHDs provided a forum to educate staff about the exploration and its goal, and to gather staff perspectives about full integration, e.g., the strengths of such a model, concerns about how it would function, and personal fears regarding this prospect. The information gathered through these efforts informed the health directors’ communication plans for each audience. Communication strategies included cogent updates for the commissioners and, for the staff, monthly newsletters and updates at routine staff meetings.

A human resources consultant surveyed and met with every staff person to obtain detailed job descriptions and develop job descriptions and a staffing pattern for a fully integrated health department. In addition, the co-leaders worked with the three different employee unions to understand and address the labor issues involved with full integration. The benefit structure in each LHD was different, and the feasibility study included provisions to ensure that accumulated leave was not lost in the transition and that no staff benefits were reduced in the new structure. Other provisions safeguarded seniority in the transition to a new entity, ensured no salary cuts and guaranteed a position for all staff (although the position may have been revised or be a new position altogether).

The co-leaders brought a staff member from each of the three LHDs along on the grant-mandated site visit. The site visit included a trip to a neighboring jurisdiction that had recently integrated two entities, and time was provided for a staff-to-staff meeting without the co-leaders’ presence. The staff each reported back to their colleagues on what they learned and in the process articulated their very strong support for the co-leaders’ efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> A Community Health Board, permitted under Minnesota statute, is a legal governing body for local public health

Based on the feasibility study, the co-directors presented a budget and operational plan for a fully integrated health department to the five boards of county commissioners in the spring of 2014. The boards all voted in favor of full integration, and the co-directors then focused their efforts on a detailed transition plan.

**Accomplishments:** Horizon Public Health became a new entity on January 1, 2015. On that date, the three health departments no longer existed, and their operations were fully integrated and known as a unified entity. As planned, salary, benefits and seniority were not compromised for any employees and all employees had been offered a job by the new entity. A new union was formed with successful negotiations at the outset.

The establishment of Horizon Public Health reflects a tremendous amount of very detailed work on behalf of the Restructuring Committee co-leads, who now serve as director and deputy director of Horizon Public Health. Moreover, Horizon Public Health received the 2014 Association of Minnesota Counties' County Achievement Award, given in recognition of their innovative effort to strengthen public health.

**Challenges:** Much of the exploration and planning entailed work that extended over months, and therefore much of the information provided during this time was an update on process and not outcomes or decisions. The co-leaders were very careful to avoid any speculation in responding to staff questions about the specifics of potential full integration, and therefore, "I do not know" was a frequent answer along the way. Despite the co-leaders' ongoing communications and change management strategies, a number of staff were quite uneasy throughout the planning and preparation phase, apparently thinking that information was being withheld. Some staff remain resistant to the new structure, despite ongoing change management efforts.

Budget development was time consuming. The Restructuring Committee discussed various aspects of the budget at length to ensure equity with respect to cost allocation. A mutually agreeable budget ultimately was developed and approved by all boards.

Moving to a new IT system also proved challenging as the initial design proved to be flawed and at the outset the IT problems were fixed by IT support specialists from the various counties. The IT system was designed by a highly regarded, experienced consultant who had done everything according to the specifications provided. In hindsight, the team leads recognized that had the consultant been asked to observe staff at work before completing the design, he likely would have modified the specifications accordingly and many of the problems encountered would have been avoided. The system difficulties were exacerbated by having several people involved in fixing problems that emerged over time. The collective "little fixes" (some of which involved undoing previous "fixes") were costly and ultimately caused network-wide problems. After several months, the Horizon CHB approved a new IT coordinator position to save support costs and ensure continuity of IT support across all Horizon Public Health locations.