LOCAL HEALTH DEPARTMENTS

GETTING STARTED: ALZHEIMER'S, COGNITIVE HEALTH & CAREGIVING ISSUES

BACKGROUND

More and more local health departments are working to advance healthy aging throughout their communities, and a few are specifically addressing dementia, cognitive health, and caregiving concerns. With the number of Americans living with Alzheimer's projected to nearly triple by 2050, local public health agencies are at the forefront of this trajectory. The following tips are designed to help local health departments begin addressing these issues.

EXISTING FRAMEWORKS

Several frameworks currently exist that help public health agencies better address cognitive health, support those living with cognitive impairment, and meet the needs of caregivers. Local health departments can incorporate facets of these frameworks into their current work and mobilize their communities on behalf of older adults.

Frameworks for local health departments

» Healthy Brain Initiative's *State and Local Public Health Partnerships to Address Dementia: The 2018-2023 Road Map* (HBI Road Map) — this expert-developed guidebook has 25 actions for public health leaders to promote brain health, better care for people with cognitive impairment, and increased support for caregivers. Jointly developed by the Alzheimer's Association and the Centers for Disease Control and

Importance of Carrying On

Despite widespread decreases in funding for many local health departments, one reassurance is that public health perseveres even during lean times. Public health has a broad portfolio and even when there are no dedicated resources to older adult health, cognitive health, or dementia, opportunities exist to incorporate these issues into existing programs and infrastructure across the lifespan.

Prevention, the HBI Road Map is mapped to four Essential Services of Public Health.

» The Framework for Creating an Age-Friendly Public Health System (AFPHS) — grounded in the Essential Services of Public Health, AFPHS supports an expanded public health role in improving older adult health and well-being. Created by Trust for America's Health and The John A. Hartford Foundation, AFPHS emphasizes preventive strategies, population- and systems-level interventions, and attention to social determinants of health.

Frameworks for community involvement

» Age-Friendly Communities — designed to educate and engage community leaders to create more livable areas for people of all ages, especially older adults. It is administered by AARP.

» Dementia Friendly America (DFA) — a nationwide network of communities that aim

to foster the ability of people living with dementia to remain in the community and engage as fully as possible. DFA is administered by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

These frameworks can offer a starting point for local health departments working toward more thorough public health responses to cognitive health, dementia, and caregiving. Both the HBI Road Map and the AFPHS Framework offer direct actions for public health systems to promote health and well-being as people age with a particular emphasis on addressing health disparities and promoting health equity. These two frameworks also bring attention to larger, longer-lasting actions that work to change policies, systems, and environments (PSE).

HEALTH EQUITY

Underserved populations — including Black, Latinx/ Hispanic, LGBTQ, and disabled individuals — have worse health and health outcomes than their comparable peer groups. This can include cognitive health. Addressing cognitive health offers local health departments another opportunity to promote health equity and reduce disparities. Special attention to assess, address, and meet the needs of these populations is essential.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Local health departments know their communities best and frequently have existing partnerships with community-based organizations. Local public health practitioners can examine these existing relationships to identify opportunities for alignment and expansion. Even when organizations are not explicitly involved in older adult issues, there may be interest to begin this work. They may have additional access, insight, or resources to contribute. Consider groups that

specialize in working with underserved populations. Types of organizations to consider include:

» Housing and homeless prevention programs
» Food banks and food insecurity programs
» Other governmental agencies such as recreation or transportation
» Faith-based organizations
» Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs)
» Aging services providers (home care, caregiver support, adult day, senior centers)
» Neighborhood coalitions

SCALING and SHRINKING

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated just how vital local health departments are and how attention of an entire agency may be pulled to a new issue suddenly. For public health practitioners beginning to engage on cognitive health, dementia, and caregiving issues, planning for multiple levels of engagement is a recommended strategy.

Action plans that can scale up or shrink down as needed best ensure that once this work begins, it can continue. Too often, well-laid plans can stall or cease when encountering a roadblock. Ensuring a plan on healthy aging and older adult health has contingencies should these roadblocks occur will help continue momentum in serving the community.

Similarly, when opportunities arise — including new funding or when COVID-19 response teams are able to return to their previous posts — action plans that include how to scale up can quickly progress. Building in attention to larger, PSE-level actions is one way to accomplish this.

This best practice guide was developed as part of a collaboration between the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency (Aging & Independence Services), the Boston Public Health Commission (Healthy Homes and Community Supports), and the Alzheimer's Association (Public Health Department).

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For more information on the public health response to Alzheimer's, visit alz.org/publichealth