Civic Engagement Builds Capacity for Health Departments

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The phrase "civic engagement," which speaks to closing the circle of communications and accountability between government and its citizens and customers, is an important one. It's captivating to explore where government, and specifically health departments, could be more like Amazon, Uber, and FedEx. These are examples of businesses that engage frequently and well with their customers, thereby setting the expectations of our customers.

When we don't quite meet those expectations (e.g., by having a modern Web site that takes instant payments or an iPhone app for logging complaints, with GPS coordinates and glorious 12 megapixel images), the customer citizen forms a diminished opinion of our services. Even though we may not interact regularly, we all want a positive review.

But is civic engagement as relevant to environmental health as it is to public works, building and planning, or elected officials?

"Environmental health is different," I might explain to a colleague, "because the mission and methods of environmental health are, generally, predetermined by the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the state department of health, and so forth. Delegation agreements, as an example, predispose how resources shall be invested. Neither the customer nor the local board of supervisors have complete sway over how to assess a facility's risk or investigate a foodborne illness."

That being said, we are still part of an enterprise and we are certainly part of a community, making civic engagement just as important for us.

I enjoy the perspective of observing many excellent environmental health leaders, most of whom embrace civic engagement as an imperative. Below are five ways to improve civic engagement in your community.

Five Essential Public Touchpoints Demanded of Health Departments

Education, Advocacy, and Partnership
Public and environmental health departments embrace education more than any other department. It's essential to raise awareness and ultimately to change behaviors.

The city of Columbus won the Dr. R. Neil Lowry Grant, presented to public health professionals or agencies that seek to advance the public's safe use of recreational water through educational, safety, operational, and technical programs, at the 2015 NEHA Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition on just such a platform.

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Columbus' growing recreational water program was beset by the turnover common to this seasonal operation. "Many of these operators are transient and only on the job for a year, and often have other responsibilities besides swimming pools," says Keith Krinn, director.

After careful analysis of inspection violation data in 2014, the city found that high cyanuric acid residuals were the most cited and primary reason for closure. Based on this insight, staff developed an informational tool and with the grant will purchase 650 USB drives to distribute these training materials to all their facilities. The operators may come and go, but the materials will always be available.

"We're big believers here … to be able to take concepts that we find and specific actionable items based on violation data to be able to make the community safer," says Krinn.

The program is already producing results: Columbus has seen a reduction in closures for cyanuric acid violations.

Social Media and Public Forums
Even when we think nobody is listening … people are. Thankfully, many examples exist of great social media campaigns designed and implemented by health departments. The budget is nearly zero and the reach is far.

In a case that generated national media attention in October 2015, a nasty outbreak of the highly contagious *Shigella* at a restaurant in Santa Clara (California) County infected hundreds of patrons and their contacts. Throughout the event, Santa Clara County utilized every resource, including Facebook and Twitter, to keep citizens and the media informed and provide timely and topical tips for preventing its spread (Figures 1 and 2).

In a nondigital context, and with a long history in environmental health policy making, we include the public forum. In this particular chosen profession, it is nearly certain that you'll rise through the ranks and find yourself one day at a community meeting or hearing, perhaps the touchstone of participatory citizenry. These too are increasingly conducted online with live

Internet streaming, interactive Q&A, and automatic archiving of participant comments.

Restaurant Inspection Results
Whether it's a searchable Web site, a LIVES Feed (LIVES is a data standard for exposing inspection results; it stands for "Local Inspector Value-Entry Specification"), or a mobile app, this is what is most visible to the largest swath of the population. Also, it's an excellent tool to have in an inspector's tool chest. New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles are the first big players to join the LIVES movement and you can find their inspection data on Yelp today. Size is no restriction; even smaller municipalities (like Boulder, Colorado, and Evanston, Illinois) with the vision and public buy-in can participate.

Beyond LIVES, many agencies are experimenting with building apps to interact directly with consumers. The California Food Inspector app (Figure 3), built originally by Contra Costa County in the San Francisco Bay Area, now publishes inspection results for Los Angeles, San Francisco, Contra Costa, Mon-

The California Food Inspector App

The Florida Department of Health's Dataset of Onsite Sewage Treatment and Disposal Systems

terey, Alameda, Sacramento, San Joaquin, and San Bernardino counties in California, and includes location-based search functionality. To join in on this platform, the health departments need only publish a LIVES feed.

Open Data
Again, on the shoulders of giants, we can easily adapt our practices and culture to embrace open data. A great example is the Florida Department of Health's public geospatial dataset, which shows inspections, health care systems and emergency operations, water, and septic systems (Figure 4; http://openfl-health.fdoh.opendata.arcgis.com/).

Noteworthy as well is the San Francisco Health Department, whose data are picked up by vendors such as Appallicious to generate a Neighborhood Score, which provides overall health and sustainability scores for every block in the city. (Editor's note: At the time of publication this program is no longer available due to a lack of funding and options are currently being explored

to incorporate this program into a different platform.) From their Web site:

"Neighborhood Score uses local, state, federal, and private data sets to allow residents to see how their neighborhoods rank in everything from public safety, to quality of schools, crime rates, air quality, and much more. The new app makes information about neighborhood health easily accessible to residents and demonstrates the power of open government data to advance community health through government transparency."

Code for America has also engineered the open publication of San Francisco housing inspection data, which can be picked up by sites like the online real estate marketplace Trulia to alert potential homebuyers of a home's health history.

In general, the position is that these data are owned by the citizens who ultimately pay permit fees. What seems benign and routine to you is often groundbreaking to an app developer or advocacy group. Get your data out there!

Work Flows With Frequent Customer Interactions
Something Amazon, Uber, FedEx, and others do extremely well is to keep customers informed throughout the process. Whether it's a text message that your Uber driver is

around the corner or proof of delivery with a digital signature line, we return to these types of companies because they respond to our desire for information … lots of information.

San Diego County's Environmental Health Department offers this type of functionality. Facilities can check the status of their business and track the progress of applications. The county also recently implemented technology that automatically e-mails or texts businesses when there is an update (e.g., when an application or other activity changes status). This automated ping keeps phone calls down, reduces notification tasks for staff and, perhaps best of all, proves to your customers that their facility is not buried on someone's desk; progress is actually happening.

These are concrete examples relevant to health departments. What other civic engagement imperatives does your community pursue? Continue the conversation at LinkedIn's Building Capacity Group at http://tinyurl.com/EHCivicEngagement.

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