

► BUILDING CAPACITY



Darryl Booth, MBA

Fort Worth Builds Capacity Through a Customer Focused and Consolidated Delivery of Municipal Services

Editor's Note: A need exists within environmental health agencies to increase their capacity to perform in an environment of diminishing resources. With limited resources and increasing demands, we need to seek new approaches to the business of environmental health.

Acutely aware of these challenges, NEHA has initiated a partnership with Accela called *Building Capacity*. *Building Capacity* is a joint effort to educate, reinforce, and build upon successes within the profession, using technology to improve efficiency and extend the impact of environmental health agencies.

The *Journal* is pleased to publish this bimonthly column from Accela that will provide readers with insight into the *Building Capacity* initiative, as well as be a conduit for fostering the capacity building of environmental health agencies across the country.

The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

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Innovation is as much an element of internal culture (read, leadership) as it is of bright and forward-thinking individuals, and this culture often runs deep and is lasting. The Samuel J. Crumline Consumer Protection Award (www.crumlineaward.com) is presented annually to local health jurisdictions that show this kind of leadership. We've kept in touch with several past awardees.

2004 Crumline Award Winner: Fort Worth Consumer Health Division (CHD), Texas

At the time of CHD's 2004 Crumline application, 24 full-time employees were responsible for protecting the safety of nearly 600,000 residents. Despite a constricted economic and hiring environment, Fort Worth was dedicated to becoming "the safest city in America" and maintaining an exemplary level of programming, performance, and protection.

CHD put forth a long-term plan to implement 10 strategic initiatives that included such goals as innovation in technology, community partnerships, personnel training, and a staff committed to "prevent, rather than respond to, undesirable consumer health issues." To optimize its efforts, the division embraced training across traditionally siloed responsibilities. Of the 24 full-time employees, 15 were elevated to a consumer health specialist title, an enhanced version of the traditional sanitarian title.

CHD found that this integrated team approach maximized its effectiveness and gave staff the opportunity to develop and embrace ownership of larger public health challenges. The division was careful to foster this professional development through ongoing continuing education in food, pool, environmental, and child care safety areas. Beyond building up its staff, CHD also focused on building relationships within the local professional, regulatory, and education communities.

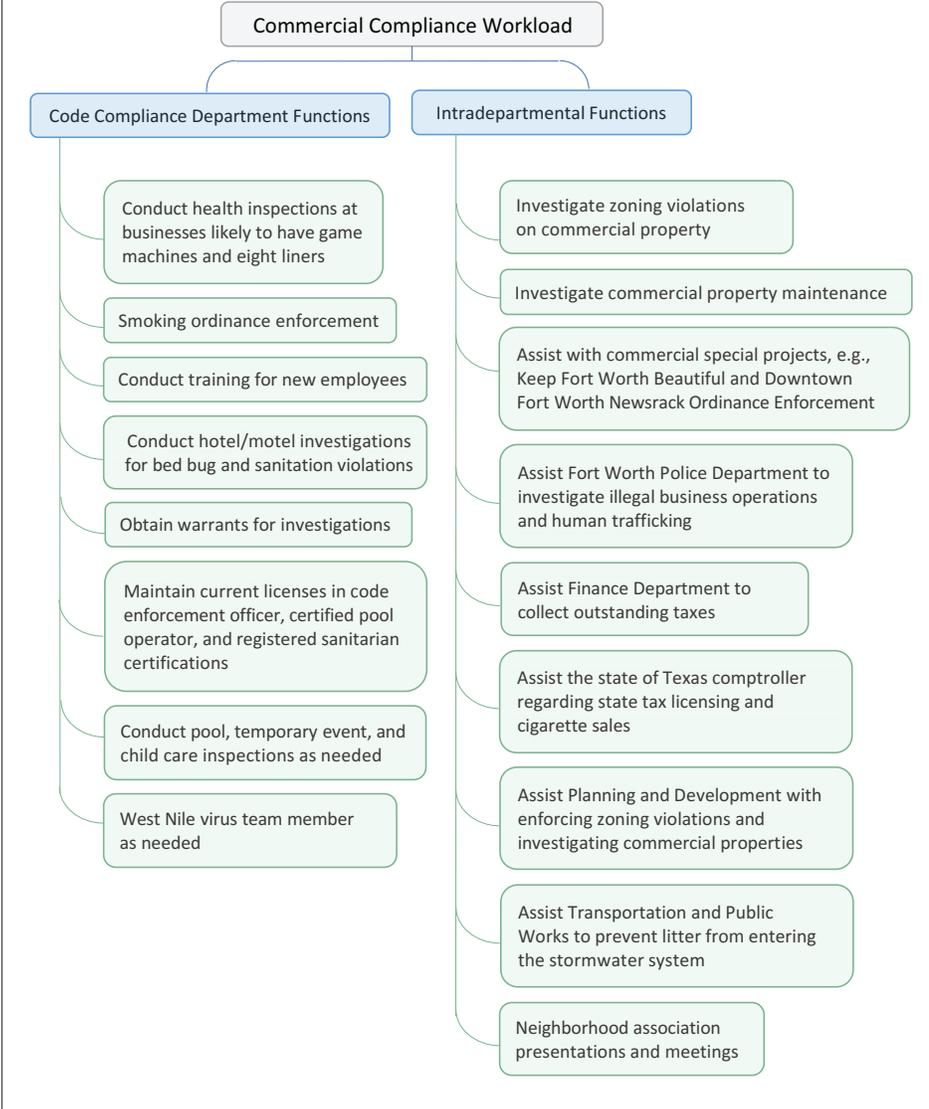
By the time CHD received its well-deserved 2004 Crumline Award, the division clearly had prioritized leveraging relationships and the sharing of the knowledge and expertise that came from those investments as key components of its success. Thirteen years later, CHD continues to innovate on this foundation.

Fast Forward to 2017

Like many local government entities, the 2008 recession impacted CHD's resources and capacity. At the same time, the population of Tarrant County, the county in which Fort Worth is located, was growing exponentially and had doubled in just one decade. All these factors put a further strain on CHD's already restricted funding and services.

FIGURE 1

Itemization of the Commercial Compliance Team's Traditional Environmental Health and Intradepartmental Responsibilities



CHD's mandate, however, to be customer-focused and efficiency-driven continued. The division delivered on this promise by leveraging and expanding on the success it had with its cross-trained consumer health specialists. Recently, CHD added a new team to its division, the commercial compliance specialists team.

The commercial compliance team originated almost by accident. In 2014, Fort Worth's Planning and Development Department passed an ordinance about gaming

rooms to crack down on illegal gambling. The program was assigned to the Code Enforcement Department, but lack of additional funding meant that the department had to get creative (Note, in 2008, several of the Fort Worth Public Health Department's functions were outsourced and the rest of consumer health was moved to the Code Enforcement Department. Consumer health still manages many of the standard environmental health programs such as food safety, hotel and pool/spa inspections, and vector control).

“Regardless of funding, somebody had to own it,” explains Gwynne Turpen, CHD consumer health superintendent. “We were already visiting many of these businesses as a part of our consumer health activities, so it naturally fell to us because it was the most cost-effective way to handle it. We certainly didn't want to be sending three different city employees to visit the same establishment.”

CHD realized that to effectively meet this mandate and ensure its personnel's success, it had to create a much more complex consumer health specialist. So, a set of Fort Worth senior-ranking consumer health specialists were selected to be cross-trained in code enforcement. Today, they are registered as both sanitarians and code enforcement officers, and they work closely with the Planning Department (Figure 1).

For the commercial compliance team, it's all about closing the loop. Though they are consumer health employees, they are able to deliver a more unified and consistent customer experience because they have expertise that spans multiple city departments. They can handle extremely complex properties and issues, considering both the public health laws and the zoning laws. They are even trained to recognize the signs of human trafficking and illegal gambling. As senior members of the CHD team, they are held to a higher standard and are required to maintain more education and knowledge. For example, when they visit a property, they have an answer for almost any issue or question that might arise and if they don't, they know who does.

“This team invests time in facilitating communications between businesses and city department employees, from the Water Department, the police, the Planning Department, and even the Forestry Department,” says Turpen. “Instead of saying, ‘Oh, you need to go talk to Planning’ and then leaving the customer to it, our teams will facilitate the introduction to the right individual in the Planning Department and monitor the case to resolution. We'll work through any issue—even if it's not our issue! Our goal is to resolve it, get the customer in compliance, and move on.”

In the beginning, the program was a bit ad hoc. Besides training, CHD staff had to locate the right resources in its partner departments, engaging in a bit of political niceties.

“It was just a matter of finding out who to call, which can be hard at first. But you just call and call, and when someone answers the phone, you start building the relationship. You’re polite and grateful. You send follow-up e-mails thanking them and letting them know how they helped the customer. I remind my team to ‘cc’ these people’s bosses so that they feel recognized when they put in the extra effort.”

Fort Worth currently has a team of six, one-stop shop commercial compliance specialists. They handle the more complex establishments in the city. The consumer health specialist role still exists and if they see something while out on an inspection that might warrant the expertise of a commercial compliance specialist, they can call their counterpart, explain the situation, and ask for next steps.

The efficiencies gained by removing the silos between multiple municipal organizations and going the extra mile to resolve uncertainties for customers not only provides

better public service but also makes the entire local government more efficient. It was, says Turpen, time for environmental health and the city to become more visible and relevant. “Environmental health and many municipal services generally like to stay off the radar. So, we started to focus on what else can we do to demonstrate everything that we do for the public.”

Elmer DePaula, assistant director for Fort Worth’s Code Compliance, Consumer Health, and Environmental Management Department, agrees and cites the changing economy as driving this innovative interpretation of city and public health service delivery. As staff budgets contracted after the recession, the city found that it had to double down, be more efficient, and prove its necessity. “We realized we could not function in a siloed mode; we had to work horizontally. We needed to adapt to the new economy. Our commercial compliance team helps us be more responsive and efficient, and deliver a better customer experience,” states DePaula.

Besides the efficiency that this team delivers for city services, Turpen emphasizes that they measure the value of this team by their reputation and perception. “We’re trusted. We end up owning a lot of stuff that’s not ours, but that’s good customer service. All our city council members know us, which is wonderful. It’s fantastic that our leaders can say, ‘I’m going to send you to Jim to take care of you,’ and know that Jim will take care of it.” She laughs and remarks, “Sometimes it’s a struggle being this popular, but my staff are trained to own it until it’s not theirs.” 🐶

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Did You Know?

The Samuel J. Crumbine Consumer Protection Award was established in 1954 and was first awarded in 1955. The award is named in honor of Dr. Samuel J. Crumbine, a sanitarian-physician and public health pioneer who was renowned for his innovative methods of improving public health protection. You can view recent Crumbine winner entries at www.crumbineaward.com/Crumbine-Award-Winning-Entries.



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