A Message from the Health Officer

Dear Howard County Residents and Partners:

We are pleased to present the Howard County Health Department (HCHD) 2021 Annual Report, with examples of how our team continues to adapt and improve in the face of COVID-19. HCHD utilized data analysis, community outreach and increased access to virtual programs to reach residents in new ways in 2021. These strategies allowed the department to overcome the challenges presented by COVID-19 and continue to provide high-quality public health services to the community.

For a second year, our team of clinical staff, public health nurses, contact tracers, outbreak managers, health educators, communicators and administrators have worked around the clock to assess, plan and execute a plan to keep Howard County healthy. While our pandemic response is a significant part of these efforts, the day-to-day public health responsibilities of HCHD have continued. This includes work on Maternal & Child Health, Behavioral Health, Healthcare Access, Reproductive Health, Food Safety Inspections, and many other programs.

These efforts would not have been possible without the support and partnership of County Executive Ball and our other County, State and Local partners.

As we look forward to 2022, there is still work to be done as we learn more about how to live safely with COVID. Ensuring the equitable distribution of our health resources continues to be a top priority as we work to inform and educate residents facing barriers to the opportunities available to them in Howard County. I encourage anyone looking for up-to-date information about our ongoing response to this pandemic to follow us on social media or visit our website at www.hchealth.org.

Maura J. Rossman, MD
Health Officer

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY:
How the Howard County Health Department responded to a public health crisis and implemented improved strategies to better serve the community

Data Analysis
Using Data and Mapping Software to Identify Areas of Need

During the COVID-19 pandemic, HCHD’s team of epidemiologists provided daily and weekly case and vaccination rate updates. As the need to target all areas of the County became evident, mapping software was used to identify areas with high cases and low vaccination rates. This data was used to reach out to businesses and organizations willing to host pop-up clinics or promote COVID testing and vaccinations.
Channeling resources where they can have the most impact is essential. The use of timely data and mapping will be expanded in future efforts to target communities where interventions and promotions can improve access to needed services. HCHD will employ a variety of means to reach out geographically, including developing partnerships with community organizations or businesses, using mobile units, and providing outreach.

Community Engagement

Using Vans to Provide Mobile Services in the Community

Prior to the pandemic, HCHD had a large van that was used to provide health services, like HIV/AIDS education, in the community. This van was repurposed to be utilized during vaccination clinics to assist clients with limited mobility. It was also used for testing at various sites. As the need grew, the health department purchased another van and plans to use it extensively to bring needed services directly to neighborhoods. HCHD has hired and trained staff who can drive the vans safely and know how to set up mobile operations on-site.

Decreasing Social Isolation

The Bureau of Population Health Assessments and Nurse Monitoring program supports seniors and persons with disabilities who want to remain independent. 1,314 evaluations were completed to assess needs for these residents to remain in their homes and ensure they have the resources required to live independently. Many clients of these programs consider this support essential and HCHD staff very important to them.

Supporting Behavioral Health

Addressing Mental Health Needs

Mental health for children and adults became a topic of national conversation as the COVID-19 pandemic has continued. The Bureau of Behavioral Health Navigation (BHN) team continued its work linking clients to behavioral and mental health resources available in the community. From the start of the pandemic in March 2020 to December 2021, referrals to the BHN program increased by more than 400%.

The Howard County Sources of Strength Program (best practice youth suicide prevention project) was able to return to an in-person format in 2021. This year’s theme was Belonging and adult advisors and peer leaders collaborated to promote messages of hope, health and strength to community members.

Reducing Opioid Fatalities

While much of the nation observed an increase in drug-related deaths in 2021, Howard County experienced a 49% decrease in opioid fatalities. This decrease can be attributed to the flexibility of the Behavioral Health team to shift Narcan training to a virtual format, increase access to peer support and expand harm reduction services available through the department.

“I enjoy my visits with my AERS nurse. She is a very good listener. She helps me with my thoughts and emotions. She helps me find direction for things I need. I don’t know what I would do without her.”
Scott (client for 11 years)
Emphasizing Virtual Services
Providing Care Safely through Telehealth

Making use of new technology, HCHD was able to adapt to provide telehealth services in its health clinics. For example, the Reproductive Health and Family Planning program provided telehealth visits when possible to ensure individuals received requested services. With specialized training for providers and accommodations made to ensure confidentiality, these services have helped many patients receive needed care in a timely fashion. The telehealth option will continue to be offered for patients to increase access to services for those facing barriers related to transportation, scheduling and other restrictions.

Utilizing Social Channels as a Primary Form of Communication

HCHD’s Communications Team has used social media since 2009. However, it was not until the COVID-19 pandemic that these channels became the primary means of communicating with the public and partners. During 2021, the team began using the NextDoor platform to reach residents who might not be followers of traditional social media accounts. Nextdoor, a hyper-local social media platform, provided a means of communication with individuals in a geographic area. HCHD reaches 82,000+ members in 380+ neighborhoods around the County to share local resources and make residents aware of health-related events in their neighborhoods.

Offering Services and Trainings Virtually

As a result of the initial shutdown, HCHD redesigned its workflows to ensure the continual delivery of services by phone or internet. After opening again, several services have continued to be provided virtually as this platform has been successful in making it easier for many people to participate. For example, applications for medical assistance are now completed online by the Bureau of Access to Care. The unit finds that the number of applications processed has increased dramatically since pre-pandemic levels.

The Health Promotion team and Local Health Improvement Coalition members also partnered to improve access to virtual programs to increase movement; promote healthier nutrition behaviors; educate community members about COVID-19; promote pedestrian, cyclist and driver safety; and more. More than 14,308 community members were reached through virtual and in-person opportunities.

Looking Forward to 2022

HCHD has continually risen to the challenges presented by COVID-19 with new or innovative changes to ongoing programming to ensure a smooth delivery of services to the community. This will include the launch of an updated Strategic Plan with renewed focus on Behavioral Health, Maternal Infant Health, and Healthy Lifestyle. These priorities were identified through data analysis and an evaluation of health needs in Howard County.