

DEVELOPING FUTURE PUBLIC HEALTH LEADERS THROUGH INNOVATION

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Type of Activity

The Center for Public Health Preparedness at the DeKalb County (Georgia) Board of Health has a history of partnership development with members of the community. Our relationship with the Rollins School of Public Health of Emory University dates back to 2000, when we identified and hired graduate student interns to work with us on a number of preparedness projects. This relationship has been very productive, leading to the development of the Student Outreach and Response Team (SORT). During the academic year, SORT students are involved in a number of public health programs ranging from environmental health to refugee health services. These opportunities enable them to gain valuable insights and perspectives, apply what they learn in the classroom, and contribute to improved community health. SORT members also attend monthly training sessions that include a wide range of subjects (e.g., public health preparedness, risk communication, refugee services, surveillance). These sessions are facilitated by local and state public health professionals.

Description of Project

The SORT program began in the months following the 2001 anthrax cases and the accompanying rise in suspicious package incidents. During that time, the DeKalb County Board of Health epidemiology team labored to meet the increased demand for case identification and investigation. This experience made it clear that if there were an event of greater magnitude, a system to acquire additional epidemiology personnel quickly would enhance our ability to respond efficiently. Over the last several years, the SORT program's scope and purpose have expanded. These changes reflect the shifting priorities, resources, and challenges faced by public health professionals, along with the lessons we have learned. The SORT program now has a clearly defined mission: "To promote future public health leadership by providing students with hands-on experiences that contribute to improved community health." This more expansive view of the program allows students to take advantage of a wide range of public health experiences and opportunities at the local and state levels.

Successes, Difficulties, and "The Unexpected"

The success of this project can be attributed to its ability to provide students with a wide range of experiences and opportunities with local and state public health agencies. It has been challenging to schedule the monthly training sessions and coordinate the schedules of students and health department staff. The interest in the SORT program has increased over the last several years and is expected to continue to rise. We have a limited capacity to accommodate as many students as want the experience, and we are hopeful that the other health departments will open their doors to this positive experience with students.

Benefits to the Agency & Community

This project provides the DeKalb County Board of Health with a mechanism to identify and recruit public health personnel. It continues to benefit the Rollins School of Public Health of

Emory University by providing students with an opportunity to apply classroom knowledge to the community. This work has benefited our community by increasing our collective ability to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy.