The Public Health Information Alliance (PHIA): Library Services and Resources Access for Public Health Practitioners

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Type of Activity and Name of Agency and Academic Institution Involved

The Public Health Information Alliance (PHIA), a partnership between the Health Sciences Library System (HSLS), University of Pittsburgh and the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) was created for the purpose of providing access to library services, information resources, and training to ACHD. The project is funded as a demonstration project for eighteen months with a grant from the National Library of Medicine (NLM). Continuation funding will be sought.

Description of Project, Its Development and Outcomes

Prior to PHIA, the majority of ACHD employees had Internet access, but lacked training in information location and retrieval in an online environment. The print information resources purchased by ACHD were very limited, with less than 20 journal subscriptions, an aging collection of books, and no librarian on staff to assist employees in meeting information needs.

PHIA is a pilot project to assess the ACHD/HSLS partnership as a cost effective and convenient method of providing ACHD access to a comprehensive public health information collection on an ongoing basis. Initial tasks included the collection of data on current information needs and information seeking practices of ACHD employees. An Internet-based survey was created for this purpose. Based on the survey results, PHIA developed a program including a website, <http://www.hsls.pitt.edu/phia/>, onsite training, access to print and audiovisual materials, and library reference services.

While final evaluations aren't in yet, utilization statistics suggest that PHIA provides ACHD with information sources and services that are of practical value, conveniently organized, and timely.

Successes, Difficulties, and the "Unexpected"

Utilization of PHIA's document delivery and training programs are among the successes of the program. Internet ordering and delivery of journal articles to ACHD is popular and heavily used. Good attendance and very positive reviews for training classes offered to date on Internet Public Health Resources, and on searching PubMed suggest that they fill a need.

Difficulties encountered have primarily arisen from the geographical dispersion of ACHD employees throughout the county. They include creating and maintaining awareness of PHIA without a physical presence in ACHD offices. Steps to address these problems started with a one hour introduction to the program attended by over 1/3 of ACHD employees. Further into the program, stickers with contact information and the web address, sized to fit on a computer monitor frame were distributed in ACHD paychecks. The Tuesday Info Tip, a weekly email with Internet search tips written by the project librarian, has proven to be effective for delivering information and maintaining program awareness.

Another problem addressed was filling environmental health information needs from a program based in a health sciences library system. This has been addressed by providing ACHD with access to circulating materials in the University of Pittsburgh Libraries such as Engineering.

Benefit to the Agency and the Community Served by the Agency

ACHD's primary benefit is increased access to high quality information, which can be used to support decision-making, program development, and delivery of services. Utilizing the existing HSLS collections and services reduces the cost while exponentially increasing the amount of information available. County residents benefit from the creation and delivery of programs and services supported by more evidence. Looking beyond the county borders, PHIA is a cost-effective model of a partnership for information access adaptable for other public health agencies.