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Overview and Guidance Documents for Public Health PBRNs

Glen P Mays, *University of Kentucky*



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I. PBRN RATIONALE, BACKGROUND & OVERVIEW

Overview of the Public Health PBRN Program (Summer 2012). The Public Health Practice-Based Research Networks Program is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that supports the development of research networks for studying the comparative effectiveness, efficiency and equity of public health strategies deployed in real-world practice settings. A practice-based research network (PBRN) brings multiple public health agencies together with research partners to design and implement studies of population-based strategies that prevent disease and injury and promote health. Participating practitioners and researchers collaborate to identify pressing research questions of interest, design rigorous and relevant studies, execute research effectively, and translate findings rapidly into practice. As such, PBRNs represent vehicles for expanding the volume and quality of practice-based research needed for evidence-based decision-making in public health.

Leading Improvement through Inquiry: Practice-based Research Networks in Public Health (Spring 2011). The field of public health has surged in public visibility and attention in recent years due to its potential to mitigate leading risks to human health and wellbeing. Advances in prevention research provide an expanding toolbox of programs, policies, and interventions to reduce health risks. As these advances occur, uncertainties loom large regarding how best to deliver efficacious public health strategies to the populations at greatest risk. The nation's local, state, and federal public health agencies—together with their peers and partners in the private and public sectors—represent a vast yet diffuse delivery system of actors charged, to greater or lesser degrees, with implementing these strategies. Unfortunately, evidence about the most effective and efficient ways of organizing, financing, and deploying public health strategies across this delivery system is extremely limited. Public health practice-based research networks (PBRN) provide unique and valuable mechanisms for generating this evidence.

Current Research Projects of the Public Health PBRN Program (Spring 2011). The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Public Health Practice-Based Research Networks Program supports research on the organization, financing, and delivery of public health services using the infrastructure of practice-based networks (PBRNs). A Public Health PBRN brings multiple public health agencies into collaboration with an academic research partner to design and conduct studies in real-world practice settings. The program supports research through several different mechanisms, including (1) large-scale Research Implementation Awards (RIAs) conducted by established networks; (2) Quick-Strike Research Fund (QSRF) awards that support short-term, time-sensitive studies on emerging issues; and (3) supplemental Research Acceleration and Capacity Expansion (RACE) awards designed to expand the scope and enhance the tempo of ongoing research within the PBRN. The Public Health PBRN National Coordinating Center coordinates the development individual and multi-network studies supported by grants from various sources. This brief provides a summary of research projects underway and under development within the public health PBRNs.

II. PBRN DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Designing a Successful PBRN in Public Health: Key Concepts (Spring 2009). Successful public health practice-based research networks (PBRNs) require organizational, financial, and intellectual resources that allow practitioners and researchers to mount relevant studies in real-world public health settings. This brief outlines characteristics likely to be important to the success of public health PBRNs, based on the experience of PBRNs in other practice settings.

Start-Up Activities for Public Health PBRNs (Spring 2009). Launching a successful public health practice-based research network requires a planned approach to developing the necessary infrastructure, relationships, and scientific direction. This brief outlines important start-up activities for PBRNs.

Building a Sustainable Public Health PBRN: Securing Ongoing Funding (Summer 2011). Practice-based research networks in public health require a diversified mix of funding to sustain their activities in research production and translation. This brief highlights tested strategies for building a strong portfolio of PBRN research funding.

Using PBRN Research to Inform Policy and Practice (Fall 2011). This brief provides examples of how findings from research projects underway through the public health PBRNs and the larger field of public health services and systems research (PHSSR) are being used to inform public health practice and policy.

Initial Research and Evaluation Concepts for Public Health PBRNs (Fall 2009). Initial research and evaluation activities of the Public Health PBRN Program are intended to provide a descriptive characterization of networks during their early stages of development. This descriptive “network analysis” provides a baseline for tracking changes in network structure and function over time. The information generated through these activities is intended to be useful for a variety of audiences, including current grantees and others interested in developing or expanding public health PBRNs, as well as policy and practice stakeholders interested in using the evidence and insight to be produced through PBRNs.

Patterns of Interaction in Public Health PBRNs: Insights from Network Analysis (Winter 2012). This report presents data from a network analysis survey conducted with public health practice-based research networks (PBRNs) to examine patterns of interaction among researchers and public health practitioners who participate in the networks. These data provide a baseline for tracking the types and frequencies of interaction that occur within networks, and reveal opportunities for promoting more productive patterns of engagement in applied public health research. Over time, these types of data can reveal how and under what circumstances PBRNs facilitate the production and application of research about public health services and delivery systems. The analysis includes data on more than 300 people who participated in one of 14 public health PBRNs during their first year of operation.

Expanding Delivery System Research in Public Health Settings: Lessons from Practice-Based Research Networks *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* (Winter 2012). Delivery system research to identify how best to organize, finance, and implement health improvement strategies has focused heavily on clinical practice settings, with relatively little attention paid to public health settings—where research is made more difficult by wide heterogeneity in settings and limited sources of existing data and measures. This study examines the approaches used by public health practice-based research networks (PBRNs) to expand delivery system research and evidence-based practice in public health settings.

III. PBRN RESEARCH RESOURCES

Finding Order in Complexity: a Typology of Public Health Delivery Systems (Fall 2008). Public health decision-makers and researchers currently lack an evidence-based framework for describing, classifying, and comparing public health delivery systems based on their organizational components, operational characteristics, and division of responsibility. Related typologies developed in the health services sector have proven extremely valuable for policy and administrative decision-making as well as for ongoing research. Performance assessment, quality improvement, and accreditation activities are now blossoming in public health—adding urgency to the need for classification and comparison frameworks. This brief describes a newly-developed empirical typology for local public health systems and highlights its policy and managerial applications.

Overview of the National Longitudinal Survey of Public Health Systems (Summer 2012). Since 1998, researchers have followed a nationally representative cohort of U.S. communities to examine the types of public health activities performed within the community, the range of organizations contributing to each activity, and the perceived effectiveness of each activity in addressing community needs. This information, obtained through a validated survey of local public health officials, provides an in-depth view of the structure and function of local public health delivery systems and how these systems evolve over time. Originally conducted with support from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Longitudinal Survey of Public Health Systems (NLSPHS) was fielded for the first time in 1998, with a follow-up survey conducted in 2006 as part of a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded project to develop an evidence-based typology of local public health delivery systems. Each wave of the survey has been linked with data on local health departments collected from the prior year's National Profile of Local Health Departments survey conducted by the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), allowing for an in-depth view of how local health departments relate to the multi-organizational delivery systems in which they operate.

A National Research Agenda for Public Health Services and Systems *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (Spring 2012). The field of public health services and systems research (PHSSR) has emerged over the past decade to produce the evidence needed to address critical uncertainties about how best to organize, finance, and deliver effective public health strategies to all Americans. To advance these efforts, a national PHSSR research agenda-setting process was used to identify a broad inventory of information needs and uncertainties that public health stakeholders face in the domains of public health workforce, public health system structure and performance, public health financing, and public health information and technology. This paper presents the results of an expert review process used to transform the identified information needs into a concise set of research questions that can be pursued through new scientific inquiry in PHSSR. Established research frameworks were used to specify the contexts, mechanisms of action, and outcomes within the public health system that require further study. A total of 72 research questions were developed from the 113 original items in the PHSSR inventory of information needs. The questions include both persistent problems and newly emerging needs in public health practice and policy. The resulting research agenda provides a starting point for mobilizing the public health scientific enterprise around contemporary, high-priority uncertainties identified by broad cross sections of public health stakeholders. Regular updates to this agenda will be required to achieve continuous improvements in both the science and practice of public health.