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Smith W. Hartley

October 16, 1966 – September 16, 2021





Katherine L. Cain, MPH
Director of the Bureau of Planning and Performance
Louisiana Department of Health's Office of Public Health

How LDH is Engaging Louisiana Residents to Plan for a Healthier 2022 and Beyond

Q&A with Bureau of Planning and Performance Director Katherine Cain and Deputy Director Robert Hines

In 2021, the Louisiana Department of Health was busy at work finishing the State Health Assessment, which serves as a report card on the health of Louisiana residents across our state. Completing this moves us to the final step of a two-part process: the creation of the State Health Improvement Plan. The last State Health Improvement Plan was completed in 2016, a year in which Governor John Bel Edwards expanded Medicaid to hundreds of thousands of adults who did not have access to health insurance.

This State Health Improvement Plan, which is slated for completion by summer of 2022, will come amid an unprecedented event – an ongoing, first-in-a-century, global pandemic. As the department continues to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, #TeamLDH is working on long-term solutions to some of the most persistent health-related problems in our state. On Nov. 1, LDH Secretary Courtney N. Phillips, PhD, released the department's business plan, which outlines a series of ambitious goals the department is working to fulfill by the end of the fiscal year, on June 30. We encourage you to read this plan online at ldh.la.gov/businessplan.

The State Health Improvement Plan will

cover five years of improving health in Louisiana.

To get a sense of where this plan is headed, the Bureau of Media and Communications' Elizabeth Bueche and Kevin Litten had conversations with two Office of Public Health staff who are responsible for coordinating the State Health Improvement Plan and bringing it into existence next year: Bureau of Planning and Performance Director Katherine Cain and Deputy Director Robert Hines.

The interview below has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.

BUREAU OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

Why are the State Health Assessment and the State Health Improvement Plan so important?

CAIN The Louisiana Department of Health created the State Health Assessment to educate folks on the overall health status of Louisianans in one package. The State Health Assessment paints a picture of the health of Louisianans, so we can have an overview of what the biggest health issues are across the state and, importantly, what health inequities are present. When you are

looking at health issues, you need to look at not just overall rates, but you also need to dig a little deeper and look at situations where some groups are more heavily affected by certain health conditions or societal conditions than other groups. You can view it at www.LouisianaSHA.com.

The State Health Improvement Plan will be a strategic plan for our communities based on the data from the State Health Assessment and based on what community members perceive to be the largest threats to their health. The State Health Improvement Plan is meant to be a shared plan, because these health issues that Louisiana faces are huge. State agencies, community organizations, nonprofits and private corporations all have to work together to really make a difference.

BMAC Can you talk about where we are in the process and what to look for in 2022?

CAIN We published the State Health Assessment dashboard in March 2021 at www.LouisianaSHA.com, and we are about to enhance the dashboard to include what we have heard from folks about their experiences with health.

In summer 2021, we had a series of vir-



Robert Hines, MSPH
Deputy Director for Planning and Performance
Louisiana Department of Health

tual meetings around the state where we engaged with residents to hear about their health concerns directly. At those meetings, we heard a lot about issues pertaining to healthcare, economic development and the environment. Cross-cutting themes from these meetings included health equity, community partnerships and access to resources and opportunities.

Following those meetings, we fielded a statewide survey. The survey was completed in October, and we had about 4,500 responses. The heart of the survey was going through a bunch of issues and saying, “How much of a problem do you think this health issue is?” The survey also looked at the foundations of health, for example, questions such as: “Does your community have access to parks?” “Does everyone in your community have an equal opportunity to get a good education?” Ultimately, we asked about people’s perceptions of access to basic sources and factors that improve health.

We are still doing some analysis of the data from the survey. The data from the survey will be added to the State Health Assessment dashboard soon.

We are currently doing some one-on-one interviews to do some deep dives to get a story behind the numbers. To do that, we are working with our partner, the Louisiana Public Health Institute. Those interviews will take place in January and February 2022, so we can really enhance our State Health Assessment with some engaging stories to make the numbers come alive.

We are getting ready to transition right now to creating the State Health Improvement Plan from January 2022 to August 2022. We’ll be doing another round of virtual meetings across the state this spring to inform that plan. In the summer of 2022, we

will publish the State Health Improvement Plan in the form of an interactive website and dashboard.

BMAC *What are the foundations of community health? How does this concept fit into the State Health Assessment and the State Health Improvement Plan?*

CAIN The foundations of community health, which are sometimes called the social determinants of health, really influence people’s health outcomes. There are severe inequities in people’s access to health, education, housing and many other factors that can cause someone to have a “bad health day” or a “good health day.”

We want to really draw attention to the foundations of community health and inequities in health outcomes and make sure people are having many more good health days than bad ones. As a department, we are working every day on addressing health outcomes, but at the same time, we can’t ignore the fact that we have such disparate poverty rates and inequities in housing and education – something that is a community and a state problem we all have to work on. We can’t just be talking about health and medical solutions in a vacuum. There is more to the story than just healthcare.

HINES Another example of a foundation of health is educational attainment and access to high-quality education. Access to high-quality education is also tied to access to insurance and rent. A person who has higher educational attainment tends to have more opportunities for employment, which tends to lead to more opportunities for health insurance, which tends to lead to more visits to a doctor.

So, we know that the more resources put into early education, the more likely you are to see better health outcomes, longer life expectancy and reduced healthcare costs over a lifetime. Educational attainment is one example of a foundation of health that has been overlooked for a long time.

BMAC *What kind of work did it take to make the State Health Assessment dashboard? And what do you think the public should get out of the dashboard?*

HINES When developing the dashboard with our technology partner, mySidewalk, we wanted to focus on health equity to guide us on how we present information and to identify what data would need to be placed on the dashboard. The Robert Wood Johnson definition of health equity is that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. We wanted the public to be able to look at the dashboard and understand the drivers of health inequities within their individual communities. This can be broken down by region or parish.

We also want the public to have a concrete idea of how to address some of the health inequity issues. Through the dashboard, you can learn how to get involved. We don’t want the dashboard to just be a place where people go and see bad news, but, rather, a place to go to receive an accurate picture of what’s going on and have guidance on how to address the problems.

BMAC *How did you decide to focus on health equity in the State Health Assessment?*

HINES It’s simply not possible to improve health outcomes in the state without a focus on health equity. For this reason, health



“We know that fixing health inequities is not a one-size-fits-all approach, so we need to figure out what strategies will work for each region.”

equity is really at the heart of public health. It has also become more of a focus on accreditation as well, and we are an accredited state health department. As such, it's vital that we address health equity in our plans, our processes and our programs.

Department leadership recognizes that we must address the foundations of community health to make substantive changes in health outcomes and to make Louisiana a more equitable place. We know that many people who are disproportionately impacted by our poor health outcomes tend to be communities that have inequitable services, programs and living conditions.

There are several factors that negatively impact health outcomes that relate to equitable access. For example, if nutrition is poor in a community, it's going to be hard to drive down or to address all the issues that arise because of poor nutrition, whether it be widespread diabetes or heart disease. In short, pursuing health equity is just the right thing to do for the people of Louisiana to live healthier, fuller lives, and the Governor and Health Secretary Phillips recognize that and have made doing so a top priority.

BMAC *How can the community get involved in the State Health Improvement Plan?*

HINES We would love for people to get involved in developing this plan. We need to have the right people at the table, the right voices being lifted, and we want to address the real needs. It's the community's plan.

We would like to engage groups across the state to be our partners in implementing the plan. So, there will be the opportunity for partner organizations to incorporate their work into this shared plan. We see this

as an opportunity to increase collaboration, communication and alignment of efforts to address important health priorities across the state.

To find out how you can get involved, go to our website at www.LouisianaSHA.com, and click on “Get Involved!” Getting the community involved is a top priority, and we invite everyone to join the conversation.

BMAC *What kind of responses from community members will be useful to you that is more illustrative than what the data can tell us?*

HINES We really want to hear from the community about what they need and what they are seeing currently. We would like the community to help us figure out who we need to talk to, who we need to work with and what strategies will work for their community. For example, the strategies for Baton Rouge may not work for North Louisiana.

Additionally, the strategies for one ethnic group might not work for another ethnic group. So, we will tell folks, “This is the issue that we saw in the data; how can we help your community fix this, and what strategies should we use?” We know that fixing health inequities is not a one-size-fits-all approach, so we need to figure out what strategies will work for each region.

BMAC *What should people in the healthcare industry know about and pay attention to with this State Health Improvement Plan?*

HINES A lot of the folks in the healthcare industry do Community Health Needs Assessments. The State Health Assessment gives people in the healthcare industry an idea

of the health of the communities that they serve and could potentially be leveraged as part of their community health needs assessments. The State Health Assessment and the State Health Improvement Plan also help people in the healthcare industry plan for trends that may impact their operations.

BMAC *Is there anything else you would like the public to know about the State Health Assessment and the State Health Improvement Plan?*

CAIN We have a great opportunity to address the health inequities in this state and to increase coordination and visibility for the great work that is going on across the state by so many public, private and voluntary organizations. Partnerships are everything in public health, so we hope that the State Health Improvement Plan will help connect us and increase our collective impact in improving the health of Louisianans. ■

Katherine L. Cain, MPH, is the Director of the Bureau of Planning and Performance at the Louisiana Department of Health's Office of Public Health. She works to advance state health improvement planning, health equity, organizational performance management, quality improvement, public health accreditation, and workforce development. She is a Certified Lean Six Sigma Green Belt. Prior to coming to OPH in 2018, she served at the New Orleans Health Department for six years.

Robert Hines, MSPH, serves as the Deputy Director for Planning and Performance at the Louisiana Department of Health, where his work is focused on process improvement, accreditation and strategic and community health improvement planning. Prior to his arrival at OPH in 2020, Robert served at the Houston Health Department for 12 years as a lead Disease Intervention Specialist in the HIV/STD prevention program, lead Perinatal HIV epidemiologist, and, ultimately, as Accreditation Coordinator/Performance Improvement Manager.