Pierce County Community Health Improvement Plan
Forces of Change Assessment
December 2013

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to summarize the results of the Forces of Change Assessment meetings held in 2013. This report will complement other assessments reports and will be used in helping to determine Pierce County's health priorities.

The Forces of Change Assessment is one of the four MAPP (Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships) assessments conducted as part of the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) process. This assessment focuses on identifying the many factors that come in to play when we think about public health and the health of our residents. These trends, factors or events need to be considered when trying to plan for improving health conditions.

Method of Obtaining Community Participation

Four Forces of Change Assessment meetings were held in the summer and early fall of 2013. These meetings were held as brainstorming opportunities, intended to conduct a "point in time" assessment of events that are unique to Pierce County. The meetings consisted of Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department staff, CHIP Core Partners, Pierce County Board of Health members and community leaders. Group input was collected through note-taking and worksheets.

Within the categories of political, economic, social and technological forces, each group was asked *"What is occurring or might occur that affects the health of our community or the local public health system?" as well as* what has been or is affecting the health of our residents. More specifically, the groups were asked to consider community:

- **Trends –** patterns over time such as migration in and out of a community or a growing disillusionment with government;
- **Events –** one time occurrence, such as a hospital closure, a natural disaster, or the passage of new legislation;
- **Factors** - discrete elements, such as a community's large ethnic population, an urban setting, or the jurisdiction's proximity to a major waterway.

Key findings

The following are key findings from the assessment:

- **Disparities in health and health care -** due to political, (health care reform) social (isolation and detachment), economic (widening income gap) and technology factors. This trend includes an inequity of access to health care, health information, is imperative to community health, as is adequate mental health, and substance abuse treatment services.
- **Sustained concern regarding substance abuse** - especially due to recent changes in Washington state laws related to the legalization of marijuana and the privatization of alcohol sales.
- **Increased poverty and disparity** - due to economic factors, especially when it comes to education, employment, housing and access to health care.

- **Rapidly changing Pierce County demographics** - increases diversity and a fluctuating military population.
- **Reduction in social and public health services due to economic forces** - emergency preparedness was of particular concern, due to issues related in part to climate change.
- **Social isolation and detachment-** due to de-socialization of communities, neighborhoods and workplaces along with social and cultural barriers create vulnerable populations.
- **The need to protect and improve the environment** (including the built environment and farm land) - a force that encompasses political, social, economic and technological components.
- **Technological advancements and access to technology -** creates opportunities for collaboration across geographies and health systems; access barriers exist.

Summary of Assessment Findings

The following summary outlines the Forces of Change identified through the assessment process. Once the forces were recorded and themed, only reoccurring topics were summarized for this report. Those topics that came up the most often are listed as "top issues."

I. Political Forces

Top issues:

Health care reform and health care systems

With the passing of the Affordable Care Act, participants identified possible opportunities and threats with its implementation. The opportunities identified were an increase in quality of care, collaboration among health systems, access to health care, and more preventive services. This will result in better long-term health outcomes. The identified threats were the possible confusion on who could qualify, how to sign up and exactly what is covered. There is also a concern about having enough providers for adequate coverage, especially for specialized services.

Funding reductions for social and public health services

Due to substantial cuts in federal and state budgets and decreased governmental revenue, participants identified the threat of reduced spending on social and public health services. This can cause competition for funding and resources, but also can be an opportunity for agencies to collaborate on fund development and sustainability efforts.

Changes in marijuana and alcohol laws

Washington state citizens voted for the privatization of liquor sales in 2012 and just recently the legalization of marijuana. There is concern about the increase in availability and use of these substances, especially among youth. These laws have the potential to change social norms around use. Another possibility mentioned, was seeing a decrease in the disproportionate numbers of minorities and youth in the criminal justice system being arrested for the personal use of marijuana.

Environmental policies

Protection of our natural resources and environment and management of our built environments are of great concern to residents. The threat of population growth, an aging and overtaxed

infrastructure, poor land management, and the impact people have on water and air quality need to be addressed through policy and enforcement.

Other political issues:

Policies impacting farmlands and food

There is a growing movement to grow, eat and buy fresh, local foods, which provides an opportunity for healthy eating and nutrition education. There are policies that threaten urban spaces needed for community gardens and food subsidies that impact farming. A recent state initiative to require food labeling to disclose genetically engineered foods was rejected by voters.

Firearm laws/ policies and gun violence (gun controls and gun rights)

There is concern that gun violence is increasing and more needs to be done by legislators on gun control. With recent media coverage, there is opportunity to advocate for policy changes.

Political atmosphere

The election of a new governor and the associated appointment of a new secretary of health provide opportunities for policy change and advocacy. Bipartisan politics and decreasing confidence in the government were mentioned as threats.

II. Social Forces

Top issues:

Substance abuse and mental illness

There is concern about the increase in the availability and use of drugs and alcohol, especially among youth. With the recent changes in laws around privatization of alcohol sales and legalizing marijuana, there is the threat of changing social norms around use. An increase in substance abuse will highlight the threat of inadequate treatment services, for both substance abuse and mental health issues. The Affordable Care Act could provide opportunities to increase health coverage and funding for treatment services.

Social isolation and disconnection

De-socialization of communities, neighborhoods and workplaces due to technology, breakdown of families, transient populations, cultural barriers and disenfranchisement was seen as a threat.

Changing demographics in Pierce County/diversity

The aging, increasingly diverse, and growing population creates opportunity for new service markets, new partnerships, and increased cultural diversity and acceptance. On the other hand, the increase in population and the aging populations may result in increased health care costs, greater demand on housing and land, increased social isolation and more demand on community programs and schools. More minorities and immigration may increase difficult-to-reach populations.

Pierce County military presence

The presence of Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Pierce County brings both opportunities and threats. The military has a transient population that creates jobs and revenue, but can also cause community

disconnect, family separations, and a high demand for community resources/services. With military personal and veterans returning from war, it brings unique challenges with addressing adjustment issues, mental health problems and physical disabilities. With federal funding being allocated to address these issues, there are opportunities for job growth and new community services.

Other social issues:

Crime, violence and abuse
Abuse, violence and threats of violence impact both individuals and the community. There was concern related to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and lack of perceived safety. Gun violence, elder and child abuse, and bullying were also mentioned as local issues.

Media and marketing
Marketing provides opportunities to reach broader audiences and help form new partnerships with the private sector. It can increase opportunities for expanding public awareness around public health issues and prompt policy change. It can also be used to market unhealthy choices (tobacco, alcohol, violence, junk foods, etc.) and influence political decisions.

Collaboration
With the threat of reduced government funding and given the collaborative nature of Pierce County, there are many opportunities for community partnership. The Affordable Care Act is one such example that could build collaboration between health care systems, public health, community services and private industry.

III. Economic Forces

Top issues:

Poverty and disparities
On an individual level, economic forces can cause income polarization and a growing income gap. Those that are near or below poverty level face the threat of homelessness, not having access to quality health care or community resources, and face many other health and social disparities.

Employment/industry
The community losing jobs and businesses was identified as a threat. There could also be a possible trend in part time employment vs. full time, which means less people are eligible for health care insurance through their employers and are making less in living wages.

Public services and social services
There is a real threat of public services reductions for public services, public health services and community social services due to budget cuts. Opportunities that could emerge from this trend include new momentum to find creative approaches to solve community problems, collaboration in using resources more efficiently, and a chance to reexamine priorities that include addressing loss of critical infrastructure and protecting the environment.

Education

Decreased school fudging and increased costs for higher education were also listed as a threat. Education disparities between high school graduation and enrollment in college were considered a direct result of economic disparities.

Other economic issues:

Health

Threats on health due to a poor economy include the increase in the number of under- and uninsured populations and the higher costs associated with poor health outcomes. There is also the threat of having increased rates of mental health conditions and less treatment options. Healthcare systems can face having a decrease in their workforce resulting in a lack of providers and services. The Affordable Care Act could provide opportunities to increase collaboration, health coverage and funding for services.

Housing

The threat of increased homelessness and a decrease in affordable and safe housing was of concern. There may be newly homeless or displaced families along with an increase in foreclosures.

IV. Technological Forces

Emerging technology and access to information creates opportunities for collaboration across geographies, automated systems, health applications, emphasis on research and data to correct misinformation and affect behavioral and policy change. There were many identified benefits and challenges mentioned with using technology. Challenges mentioned were inaccessibility to technology and information by certain populations - i.e. elderly, homeless, non-English speakers and low income. Threats associated with the trend of new and increased technology use include social isolation, decreased physical activity, and widespread misinformation.

V. Other Forces

Emergency preparedness: natural and man-made disasters

Natural and man-made disasters and Pierce County's ability to respond to them was identified as a threat. With the challenge of climate change and recent severity of weather events, there is an opportunity to address emergency preparedness at the individual, neighborhood, community and governmental level.