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San Diego County’s Health and Human Services Agency

It Cannot Demonstrate That It Employs the Appropriate Number of Public Health Nurses to Efficiently Serve Its Residents

Background

Responsible for providing health and social services to its 3.3 million county residents, San Diego County’s Health and Human Services Agency (Health Agency) is authorized to hire nearly 200 public health nurses (PHNs) to promote and protect the health of at-risk populations. Among their many responsibilities, PHNs respond to public health emergencies or needs as they arise, which can involve providing vaccinations during disease outbreaks such as San Diego County’s outbreak in 2017 of hepatitis A. We reviewed whether the Health Agency had adequate levels of PHNs to appropriately serve county residents.

Our Recommendations

The Health Agency should do the following:

- Implement PHN efficiency measures to ensure it efficiently meets the public health needs of at-risk county residents and that it staffs the right number of PHNs in its various locations.
- Distribute its surge plan—a framework for responding to incidents such as the hepatitis A outbreak—to PHNs and appropriately train them to ensure they are prepared for future public health emergencies.

Key Findings

- Despite having data available to assess whether it has an adequate number of PHNs who are appropriately assigned to meet the needs of county residents, the Health Agency does not consistently use the data to help assess PHN staffing assignments. Further, the caseload per PHN appears to be higher for some programs and regions.
 - » In response to our survey, PHNs raised workload concerns in the Foster Care and Children’s Services programs—they indicated that their caseload was too high to effectively accomplish their job.
 - » Based on our review, the average caseload for PHNs exceeded the State benchmarks for both programs since 2015.
 - » The Health Agency does not require its managers to monitor each PHN’s caseload.
 - » We found notable differences in the PHN caseloads for the Foster Care program among its six regions—one region averaged just under the State’s benchmark while the PHNs in each of the five other regions carried more cases on average than the State’s benchmark.
- Although the Health Agency had a draft surge plan and implemented it during the outbreak, it did not finalize the plan until June 2018. The surge plan could serve as a training tool for future public health emergencies.

Average Caseloads for Foster Care and Children’s Services Exceeded State Benchmarks

