



San Diego's Hepatitis A Outbreak

By Acting More Quickly, the County and City of San Diego Might Have Reduced the Spread of the Disease

Background

National, state, and local public agencies contribute to protecting public health, including infectious disease control. The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) uses federal guidance as part of its efforts to control and prevent infectious disease in the State. Each county has a local health officer who helps ensure the public health of its residents. In March 2017, the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency issued a health advisory to its medical community to notify it that an outbreak of hepatitis A was occurring; hepatitis A is a highly contagious liver disease that can range in severity and in rare cases can cause liver failure and death. We reviewed how both the county of San Diego (county) and the city of San Diego (city) identified, contained, and treated the hepatitis A outbreak.

Key Recommendations

- The Legislature should clarify that local health officers may direct other governmental entities to control the spread of communicable diseases and require local health officers to promptly notify and update appropriate entities about communicable disease outbreaks that may affect them.
- The county should do the following:
 - » Prevent delays when responding to future communicable disease outbreaks by including certain critical elements in its response plans.
 - » Ensure collaboration and cooperation with other local jurisdictions and respond to future outbreaks by promptly convening a group of regional leaders and sharing relevant data with local jurisdictions.
- The county and city should enter into an agreement to clarify each entity's roles and responsibilities over public health matters, including leadership in coordinating response efforts.
- The city should identify and address any unresolved issues related to the hepatitis A outbreak before the emergency declaration, including those related to adopting sanitation measures.
- CDPH should amend its outbreak response plan to recommend that jurisdictions set vaccination targets, establish dates to meet those targets, and determine needed resources as soon as possible.

Key Findings

- Although the county took some reasonable steps early in its response to the outbreak, it did not establish concrete objectives with time frames that could have guided its response.
 - » It did not set objectives that identified the number and timing of vaccinations it planned to administer and did not calculate the resources needed—such as vaccines, nursing staff, and vaccination events—to meet its objectives.
 - » Because of weaknesses in its planning, the county was slow to vaccinate many of its most vulnerable residents.
- The county did not significantly increase its vaccination efforts until the county health officer declared a local health emergency, more than five months after the county identified the outbreak.
- Although the county collaborated with the city and identified multiple sanitation efforts to address the outbreak and improve conditions for the at-risk populations in the city, neither the county nor the city promptly implemented them.
 - » Neither the county nor the city began to fully implement sanitation measures related to hand-washing stations, public restroom access, and sanitizing streets and sidewalks until nearly six months after the county identified the outbreak.
 - » The county did not share sufficient information with the city about the outbreak, hindering the city's full recognition of the seriousness of the outbreak and of the need to implement sanitation measures quickly.