

## **Best Practice: How Public Health Labs Can Best Work With the Media**

### **Interview with Frances Downes, DrPH, director of the Michigan Public Health Laboratory**

*Background: In April 2009, the H1N1 crisis hit public health laboratories hard. Labs were swamped with samples to be tested; some labs received as many samples in one month as they typically did in one year. In addition, the media was clamoring for information on the pandemic. The Michigan Public Health Laboratory's strategy for dealing with the media turned out to be a boon for both the media and the lab.*

#### **Frances Downes:**

The media was really interested in issuing daily press releases on H1N1, and they wanted more than just stock footage of sick people. They knew that a laboratory could provide dramatic footage, so they asked repeatedly to film the lab. At first, we just kept saying “no.”

Then James McCurtis, our Public Information Officer (PIO), suggested that we hold an open house—just once—for the media. We decided to try it. James sent a press release to all his media contacts notifying them of the date and time. Because the lab is a secured facility, he required them to RSVP and to provide details if they were going to bring a crew.

Our plan was to break the media representatives into three groups. I would meet the first group, escort them to one of the lab areas, then return to the lobby and repeat the process with the other two groups. The idea was that they would rotate through three areas of the lab. In actuality, the flow was slower than anticipated, as some discussions got involved. We also established that they would have a chance to talk with me after touring the lab—but not for an unlimited amount of time, as I had a meeting at noon.

I believe about twenty people showed up for the open house. They came from a variety of media markets within Michigan, including Detroit, Toledo and Lansing. A TV station from Grand Rapids showed up, as did Michigan Public Radio and the local AP news. The Office of Public Health Preparedness came over and filmed, too, which was great because now they have the B-roll for future use. Subsequently, most outlets ran stories about the lab plus video of the lab on their websites.

Uniformly, those who came to the open house put a very positive spin on the story. In other words, they didn't frame it as “Lab Falling Behind.” They seemed to appreciate the laboratory taking initiative, and came away with the perspective that the lab was doing a great thing. Though it was grueling to get it set up, the open house was a boon for the lab, and made the lab leadership team happy.

One key to the success of the outreach was working closely with our PIO. He had a need—to efficiently connect with the eager media—and it turned out to be a positive thing for the laboratory. It was also extremely helpful to have a PIO, as media representatives knew that they could turn to him (or to our website) with further questions. Otherwise, it would have been very time-consuming to deal with follow-up questions. One thing that we learned for next time is to have more staff available to help manage the flow of the lab tours.