

# Montana Public Health Laboratory System Assessment Report

Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services  
Laboratory Services Bureau September 2008

## Overview

A meeting of laboratory partners was held on April 30, 2008, to assess the Montana Public Health Laboratory System. The assessment followed a national program format that was based on the 10 essential public health services. The intent was to bring system partners together with diverse perspectives in order to identify gaps within the State Public Health Laboratory System and to propose ways to address these gaps. This assessment was the initial step in promoting collaboration between system partners and in strengthening the scientific base for public health laboratory practice improvement through a formal system. A preliminary summary report from this assessment was distributed to participants in June 2008. This report summarizes three issues for which action has been recommended.

## Communication

The lack of a comprehensive communication system among our various system partners was one of the common gaps identified in this assessment. Although participants acknowledged that there are good communication practices among clinical partners regarding emergence of infectious disease, other areas of the system are lacking or are not included in this realm of communication. By improving the communication between all system partners, the network will be stronger and better prepared to respond to an event of public health significance.

## Action:

Create a Montana Laboratory Forum. This forum will prioritize and focus on various areas of concern in the Montana Public Health Laboratory System. One charge to this forum will be to formalize a communication system plan between partners, including standardizing communication methods among clinical, environmental, veterinary, agricultural and regulatory partners. Improved communication between laboratory professionals and clinicians will also be addressed. This plan will involve all partners, and workgroups will be created in order to break this task into more manageable pieces.

## Assessing Needs

A lack of in-depth knowledge about the needs of our system partners was another common gap identified in several of the breakout sessions. Although the state Public Health Laboratory System may be very good at addressing needs in some areas, needs in other areas may be lacking.

First, the Montana Public Health Laboratory System needs a written mission and purpose statement. In addition the System needs to develop clear, concise, and measurable objectives and be able to use them for system evaluation. Once these objectives have been determined, the Montana Laboratory Forum will be able to focus on developing a needs assessment for system partners.

**Action:**

Utilizing the Montana Laboratory Forum, develop clear, concise, and measurable objectives for the Montana Public Health Laboratory System. These objectives will be used to evaluate system performance. The needs of system partners will be assessed, to include the standardization of practices, impact of workforce shortages, training needs, financial resources, accessibility of services and surge capacity. Developing objectives and performing a needs assessment will further identify specific required improvements and allow the Montana Laboratory Forum to focus on areas that are of greatest concern.

**Education**

A lack of knowledge regarding the roles and relationships of the many partners in the State Public Health Laboratory System was also identified as a common gap. Providing educational opportunities to laboratory system partners, as well as the public, is a proactive approach that will help to strengthen the system overall. Educating partners regarding their role in the system and encouraging partners to respond appropriately to various public health issues, will provide a stronger more efficient infrastructure for the Montana Public Health Laboratory System.

**Action:**

Create workgroups from members of the Montana Laboratory Forum which will focus on educational issues, such as topics of public health concern and proactive community education. Providing

educational opportunities within the system will allow partners to gain a better understanding of their role and relationship to each other and the importance of strengthening these relationships, in an effort to improve services, share resources, and open lines of communication.

By providing education and encouraging community participation in public health programs, Montana residents will gain a better understanding of public health and their role in helping protect and improve their health.

**Final Comments**

This Public Health Laboratory System Assessment is a tool to help move the Montana Public Health Laboratory System toward achieving national standards based on the 10 essential public health services. Through the proposed action steps, the roles of all stakeholders and system partners will be more clearly defined, as will the importance of these roles in the larger public health system.

By including many partners in a systems approach regarding public health, the Public Health Laboratory System will gain strength leading to improved outcomes such as more efficient public health services, along with more effective laboratory practices and response to significant public health events.

The Montana Public Health Laboratory System will strive for continuous improvement in the field of public health. We are excited about this new endeavor.

**For more information contact:**

**Montana Public Health Laboratory      1400 Broadway      Phone: 406-444-5970**  
**Debbie Gibson, Program Manager      Helena, MT 59620      Fax: 406-444-1802**