

Public Health Modernization Funding Supports Disaster Preparedness in Clackamas County

Collaboration with Northwest Family Services Builds Resilience and Preparedness for Heat and Wildfires

Clackamas County is home to a significant agricultural industry. The local community, including farm owners and farm workers who speak Spanish, need to be prepared for heat, wildfires and other disasters. The partnership between Northwest Family Services (NWFS) and Clackamas County Public Health Division (CCPHD) is essential to this effort. Having worked together to support Clackamas County residents through the disasters of 2020 – including middle-of-the-night wildfire evacuations – the partners now turn their focus to supporting community resilience and disaster preparedness.

Disasters of 2020 Call for an Adaptive Response

In early 2020, Clackamas County farm owners began asking the County for COVID-19 test kits for their employees. Jamie Zentner, a program planner at CCPHD, immediately reached out to NWFS, who had received funding earlier in the pandemic to support farm workers and had strong relationships with farm workers and owners in the area. “They were a natural go-to,” said Zentner. “They have established trust in the community, they have robust capacity and they have bilingual staff.”

CCPHD and NWFS partnered to administer COVID-19 tests and vaccinations on-site at farms and convenient community-based pop-up clinics. But, their services went beyond that. NWFS staff became a reliable source of information for farm workers on how to maintain their health while ensuring that the literal fruit of farmworkers’ labors continued to travel to local and regional markets and homes. “We had a COVID focus but were able to bring other resources to that setting that had to

do with worker well-being, like cancer screening and substance abuse programs,” said Brandon Orozco, a program manager at NWFS. “Our message was that we can protect your workers, and these other services will help your business thrive.”

When wildfires and severe heat events hit Clackamas County in 2020 and 2021, the strong relationship between CCPHD, NWFS and local farms proved vital. CCPHD and NWFS staff were already working together, so they were ready to help evacuate farmworkers at a moment’s notice when high winds and fire threatened Colton, Estacada and Molalla. According to Jackie Vargas, health navigation department manager at NWFS, **“Everything shifted from one week to the next. We all were leaning on each other to get through the first part of the pandemic. Then, there were forest fires, and we were evacuating people in the middle of the night. We had flexibility and funding to evacuate people to a safe place.”**



Public Health Modernization Funding Focuses on Resilience

The collaborative response to COVID-19 and the 2020-2021 wildfires was essential, but the story doesn't end there. Every day, the work NWFS and CCPHD do together focuses on helping people prepare to be resilient to upcoming challenges, rather than waiting to respond.

In 2022, the NWFS team began work on a climate change heat-mapping program. They drove around the region with heat probes to identify areas where record high temperatures overlapped with high concentrations of vulnerable residents. This data showed the areas with the most need and determined where the team distributed air conditioning (AC) units in 2022 and 2023. The heat-mapping and AC unit distribution efforts fit into NWFS' larger Climate Change Program. The program also provides resources on home weatherization and tips for lowering energy bills, along with general education on the impacts of climate change.

By increasing community preparedness and resilience, the program equips people with tools to help prevent illness and other health impacts when disasters do arise. The goal is to empower communities in times of crisis, but also to share knowledge and resources to reduce the impacts of climate change on their daily lives.

The overarching impact of the partnership goes deeper than any number of COVID-19 test kits or AC units distributed. By showing up in times of need – and continuing to show up over time – NWFS and CCPHD have established a meaningful presence in the community. A farmworker who came to know NWFS through their farm outreach program might reach out for help navigating the healthcare marketplace or seeking cancer screening services. Maybe they'll point a friend toward NWFS to find a cooling shelter during an extreme heat event. In Vargas' words, "We plant seeds with the community, and our community comes back to us for services as our relationship grows."