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Portage County Health District Faces $450,000 Loss in Federal Public Health Funding

Ravenna, Ohio – The Portage County Health District (PCHD) is joining local health departments across Ohio in raising concerns over the abrupt loss of federal public health funding. This unexpected change is a result of national budgetary shifts and is projected to significantly impact local programs and services.

On March 25, 2025, the Ohio Department of Health (ODH) notified health departments, including PCHD, of a sudden modification to the project end date for several federally funded grants. The deadline was moved from December 31, 2025, to March 24, 2025. This adjustment triggered a national suspension of work on all associated projects. The Ohio Department of Health did not receive prior notice, leaving state and local health officials working quickly to assess the implications.

The funding withdrawal stems from a broader action by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which recently rescinded more than $11.4 billion in public health funding nationwide. As a result, PCHD is facing a loss of approximately **$450,000**, effective immediately.

"These funds were vital to maintaining and enhancing services, especially those implemented or expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic," said Rebecca Lehman, MPH, MPA, CHES, Health Commissioner. "The sudden loss of support limits our ability to protect the public and deliver critical health programs."

Services and Programs Impacted:

- Public health contracts, including those with community partners like Kent State University

- Communicable disease monitoring, surveillance, and response

- Contracts with Professional Consulting Group (PCG) and individuals to support disease investigation and data visualization

- Epidemiology and data infrastructure

- Infection control and health outreach

This loss hinders PCHD's ability to maintain momentum in disease surveillance, data-driven decision making, and emergency response. It also limits the health district's capacity to address ongoing threats such as measles, avian influenza, and other infectious diseases.

At the onset of the 2020 pandemic, Ohio ranked **48th out of 50 states** in public health funding, according to a 2019 study. Emergency federal funding provided through the CDC helped local departments like PCHD build much-needed capacity. While these funds were never intended as a permanent solution, they allowed agencies to address gaps and prepare for future emergencies.

The sudden cut will especially impact rural areas, where public health infrastructure is already stretched thin. Without sustainable state or federal replacements, Ohio's ability to respond to public health crises is significantly weakened.

PCHD has not received additional guidance about the future of federal funding or if replacement funding will be made available through the proposed state budget. At present, the budget does not appear to address the shortfall, further compounding local challenges.

Several contractor positions funded through federal dollars have been paused or eliminated. More programmatic reductions may follow depending on future funding decisions.

Despite the challenges, PCHD remains committed to its mission: to **promote health, prevent disease, and protect the environment** in Portage County. The team is actively evaluating internal operations, seeking alternative funding opportunities, and collaborating with state and local partners to continue serving the community.

"As we learn more, we will keep our community informed of any service changes," said Rebecca Lehman, MPH, MPA, CHES, Health Commissioner. "We are committed to transparency, preparedness, and doing everything we can to protect public health."

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Impacts of funding cuts on the Portage County Health District:
- Elimination of several contractor positions:
    - PCHD contracted with a public health expert who helped to organize public health data on communicable diseases such as COVID-19, influenza, etc. This person also updated data dashboards and monitored community health trends of infectious diseases.
    - PCHD contracted Professional Consulting Group (PCG) that assisted PCHD with communicable disease investigations. They supported daily case investigations, follow-up with positive cases, and disease reporting.
    - PCHD contracted with Kent State University Department of Geography to help PCHD develop public health dashboards and visualization tools for internal use (to assist PCHD to make data-driven decision) as well as dashboards for the public to use (food resource dashboard).

Direct impacts of funding cuts to Portage County residents:
- Elimination of several contractor positions:
    - Public health dashboards such as the COVID-19 dashboard will not be updated as frequently.
    - PCHD public health nurses will be moved from other community outreach programs such as community education, BP checks, off-site community vaccination clinics, etc. into the communicable disease program.
    - PCHD will not be able to sustain our current pace of progress on the creation and implementation of data visualization tools such as the food resource dashboard.
        - The food resource dashboard is an online tool that allows the user to find where food pantries and hot meal sites are located.

Communicable diseases, also known as infectious diseases, are illnesses caused by bacteria, viruses, parasites, or fungi that can be spread from person to person, animal to person, or through contaminated food, water, or surfaces.

Common examples include:
- **Respiratory illnesses:** Measles, COVID-19, influenza, pertussis (whooping cough), tuberculosis
- **Foodborne illnesses:** Salmonella, norovirus, E. coli
- **Vaccine-preventable diseases:** Measles, mumps, rubella, hepatitis A and B
- **Vector-borne diseases:** West Nile virus, Lyme disease
- **Sexually transmitted infections:** HIV, syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia
- **Zoonotic diseases:** Diseases that spread from animals to humans, such as avian influenza (bird flu)

In public health, controlling the spread of communicable diseases is critical to protecting the overall health of the community.

Monitoring communicable diseases is a core responsibility of local health departments. This process is often called **disease surveillance** and includes:

- **Case Reporting:** Healthcare providers, laboratories, and hospitals are required by law to report certain diseases to local health departments.
- **Data Collection & Analysis:** Public health teams collect and analyze this data to look for patterns, increases in cases, or unusual clusters of illness.
- **Trend Monitoring:** Using systems and dashboards, we track seasonal trends (like flu season), emerging diseases, and outbreaks.
- **Coordination with State and National Databases:** Data is shared with the Ohio Department of Health and the CDC to monitor broader public health trends.

Surveillance helps identify outbreaks early, prioritize public health responses, and inform community and healthcare providers about risks.

When a reportable communicable disease is identified, PCHD steps in to investigate. Here's what that process looks like:

1. **Case Interview:** PCHD staff or contracted individuals contact the infected individual (patient) to confirm details, symptoms, travel history, close contacts, and potential sources of exposure.
2. **Contact Tracing:** Identifying people who may have been exposed to the infected individual, especially for highly contagious diseases like measles or COVID-19.
3. **Risk Assessment:** Determining the risk of further spread based on the setting (such as schools, healthcare facilities, or workplaces).
4. **Public Notification:** If necessary, issuing public health advisories or alerts to notify the community.
5. **Control Measures:** Recommending or providing treatments like vaccines. Advising isolation, quarantine or exclusion from school or work, as needed.
6. **Collaboration:** Working with hospitals, long-term care facilities, schools, and other community partners to contain the spread.
7. **Data Reporting & Documentation:** Ensuring findings are documented and reported to state and federal health authorities.

When done effectively, surveillance and investigation can stop outbreaks early, prevent additional infections, and save lives. *Without sufficient staffing or resources, these critical activities are delayed or reduced, increasing risk to the community.*

Public updates may be less frequent, and data may not be as current, which could delay public health interventions.

What is epidemiology and data infrastructure in layman's terms?

Epidemiology is the study of how diseases and health conditions spread, who they affect, and how they can be controlled or prevented.

In public health, epidemiologists:
- Track patterns of disease in communities to understand who is getting sick, when, where, and why.
- Analyze data to identify outbreaks and trends.
- Investigate causes of illness and injury, such as infections, environmental exposures, or behavioral risks.
- Inform public health actions by providing evidence-based guidance for prevention and response.
- Monitor the effectiveness of health programs and interventions over time.

Simply put, epidemiology is the science that helps public health officials understand what is happening in our community, why it is happening, and how to stop or prevent it from happening again.
It's essential for making informed decisions about vaccinations, outbreak control, community education, and emergency preparedness.

In simple terms:
- Tracking diseases in the community.
- Using software to organize and analyze health data.
- Sharing information with the public and healthcare providers to guide decisions.

With funding cuts, data systems are updated less frequently, and fewer staff are available to analyze and communicate information. This delays public awareness and slows response to health threats.

Has the county health department received guidance on future federal funding or the state budget? What is in the proposed state budget?

At this time, the proposed state budget does not include replacement funding for the rescinded federal dollars. This means:
- No clear plan currently exists to sustain or restore the impacted programs.
- PCHD continues to monitor the state budget process.
- We are actively advocating for solutions, but as of now, no supplemental funding has been identified.

We will keep our community informed of any changes to our services. Our goal remains to protect the health of Portage County and continue our mission of promoting health, preventing disease, and protecting the environment.