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MAKING CONNECTIONS TO SAVE LIVES

As we enter the third calendar year of the COVID-19 pandemic, states continue searching for strategies to achieve successful results in managing and containing the virus. Before deciding on a solution, states must identify the problem which is exactly what the **Wyoming Department of Health (WDOH)** did with healthcare staffing shortages early in the pandemic.



WDOH quickly highlighted and recognized the staffing shortage of health care personnel in hospitals and other care sites like long-term and assisted living facilities and utilized established partnerships across agencies and associations to begin solving this looming issue. The agencies that deal with these negotiations, however, may not hold the inherent knowledge of needs and requirements of the requesting facilities. To utilize expertise and appropriate resources, WDOH entered a partnership with the **Wyoming Hospital Association (WHA)**, which was more attuned to the needs of specific hospitals across the state.

This partnership took a three-pronged approach to handling the federal dollars provided to the state. First was **establishing a direct contract between WDOH and WHA** for the recruitment and reimbursement of temporary medical personnel. Second, **WDOH provided flexibility to the WHA to pursue medical personnel** through its existing relationship or to reimburse hospitals that were able to successfully recruit medical personnel themselves. The final angle of support was **direct aid to hospitals**, following CARES Act and ARPA funding guidelines and being reimbursed through FEMA.

While it sounds like a solution borne of the direct response to COVID-19, **these partnerships were long standing before the pandemic**. The WDOH, in previous years, anticipated staffing shortages at the county level for a number of eventualities – meaning they anticipated the need for contracts between adjacent hospitals. The type of staffing overload created by COVID-19, however, resulted in statewide shortages that amplified any sort of imaginable staffing shortages.

“These staffing shortages in our hospitals and critical care facilities were significant,” Dirk Dijkstra, The Wyoming Department of Health, Health Readiness and Response Section Chief said. “Establishing a direct contract with the Hospital Association allowed for a level of flexibility and provided an avenue for the recruitment of critical personnel. This was all possible because of relationships established prior to the pandemic.”

Having the ability to lean on each other provided a successful and effective solution for these agencies. The WHA already had existing staffing agencies that they preferred and had worked with in the past, allowing for quick deployment of additional health care staff and direct funding to state care facilities based on specific needs of the facility.

“Years of exercise and agency cooperation provided a strong platform for response,” Lynn Budd, Wyoming Office of Homeland Security Director said. “As a result of preplanning Wyoming agencies and communities have strong relationships which benefit the state as a whole.”

The contract between WDOH and WHA provided great flexibility for WHA in recruiting additional health care staffing personnel to Wyoming healthcare facilities. It is unlikely WHA would have been as successful without this flexibility in recruiting personnel.

While there are many benefits to a whole-of-government approach to alleviating staffing shortages in situations like these, one of the biggest benefits can be seen in the ease of reporting. These pre-existing relationships and necessary knowledge of health facilities, such as the WHA, allows for a more organized and centralized tracking and reporting process. This benefit is seen in the reimbursement process when documentation for the use of federal funding is needed.

Wyoming is enjoying the success of these solutions to healthcare staffing, but the unsung hero in this practice is teamwork. Each of these agencies and associations leaned on their partnerships for resources and know-how while utilizing their own knowledge and resource strengths for other aspects of the response. These partnerships and contracts, which are agreed upon between agency and association – not codified in statute, facilitated responsible responses, and allowed for the best protection and care to the residents of their state, while respecting the profession of the health care workers and paying them their fair share.

It is the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) that those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.

– Charles Darwin

If you would like more information or have a state practice you'd like to highlight as part of this ongoing series, please contact [Jamie Logan](mailto:jamie@nemaweb.org)

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