



## How a Regional Health Department Would Create a Healthier Lehigh Valley

A Fact Sheet from RenewLV

The idea of a regional health department serving all of Lehigh and Northampton Counties has been discussed for many years. In January 2009, the region took a historic step toward this goal when the Lehigh Valley Board of Health—11 members jointly appointed by the two counties—held its first meeting and began work on developing the services plan and budget for a Lehigh Valley Health Department.

The Board of Health's planning phase, supported almost entirely by foundation grants (i.e., non-public funds), is expected to be completed in early 2010. The plan and budget will then be subject to approval by the Pennsylvania Department of Health, Lehigh and Northampton Counties, and local municipalities.

The Lehigh Valley Health Department would be the first bi-county health department in Pennsylvania, serving as a statewide model for regional collaboration in promoting healthy individuals, families and communities. This fact sheet discusses why establishing a regional health department is important for the Lehigh Valley and addresses a few commonly asked questions.

### The Key Benefits of a Regional Health Department

**Providing comprehensive public-health services to communities across the Lehigh Valley.** The Lehigh Valley currently has two excellent local health departments that provide comprehensive services: the Allentown and Bethlehem Health Bureaus. However, more than two-thirds of Lehigh Valley residents live outside of these cities and thus must depend on a limited public-health infrastructure that is fragmented across various state agencies. A regional health department will address this disparity (without diminishing services in the two cities that already have comprehensive public-health services) and

boost the Lehigh Valley's ability to address health and safety risks that affect all parts of the region.

With a regional health department, communities across Lehigh and Northampton Counties will have access to public-health services that encompass personal and environmental health. The box below shows examples of both:

#### Personal Health

- Child and adult immunizations
- Screening for communicable disease
- Prenatal screenings and services
- Education/services to promote nutrition, physical activity, and smoking cessation
- Cancer prevention services
- Chronic-disease management

#### Environmental Health

- Monitoring of air and water quality
- Restaurant inspections
- Inspections of public beaches, swimming pools, child-care facilities, and other community settings

**Coordination of prevention efforts across jurisdictional lines.** Health risks such as communicable disease, food-borne illness and environmental contamination do not conform to municipal or county lines. Also, many in the Lehigh Valley regularly travel across county lines in the course of their daily lives—to work, attend school or recreate. Further, in the event of a natural disaster, epidemic/pandemic or other public-health emergency, an efficient regional response will be critical in reducing illness, injury and lives lost.

In sum, effective protection and improvement of health must take place at a regional level. A Lehigh Valley Health Department will make this possible by coordinating how the region's various players—across the public, private and nonprofit sectors—work together to identify and address critical health needs.

**Additional state health funds for the region, plus a greater ability to compete for major grants.** The two primary state funding sources for local public-health services—Act 315 funds, for health department operations, and Act 12 funds, for environmental health—are allocated on a per capita basis. Currently, the Lehigh Valley receives these funds based on the residential population served by the Allentown and Bethlehem Health Bureaus (179,000 people). Act 315 and Act 12 funds for the Lehigh Valley total \$1.3 million annually. While significant, *this is less than one third of the \$4.7 million the region could be receiving* for a health department serving all of Lehigh and Northampton Counties. Without a regional health department, the Lehigh Valley is missing out on over \$3 million in *additional* state funds for public health.

Also, when applying for major federal grants, the Lehigh Valley’s two local health departments often must compete against departments serving large metropolitan areas. A regional health department serving more than 600,000 people will enable the Lehigh Valley to vie more successfully for major health grants.

**More efficient use of public health dollars.** By serving a large population base, a regional health department would achieve “economies of scale”—with the per-person costs decreasing as the number of people served goes up. These savings will be realized through less duplication in services and administrative systems, streamlined information management, and more efficient purchasing and maintenance functions.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**I already have health insurance and receive services from my own health care provider. How would a regional health department benefit me?** Public-health services matter for everyone, regardless of whether they have insurance. Public health protects against environmental health risks (food-borne disease, air and water contamination, indoor

environmental hazards, and others), contains the spread of communicable disease, assesses health needs, and ensures emergency preparedness. The increased public-health capacity that will be possible through a regional department will mean better prevention and readiness that matter for *all* residents and workers in the Lehigh Valley.

**Where will funding for a Lehigh Valley Health Department come from?** The department will be funded through a combination of sources, including state funding from Act 315 and Act 12 (the major funding streams noted above), grants from the Pennsylvania Department of Health, and a “local match” (required for the Act 315 dollars) made up of resources from local government and its partners (such as hospitals and other health providers). It is important to note that the resources that will fund most, if not all, of this local match are already being allocated and spent in the Lehigh Valley—meaning that the additional cost to taxpayers will be minimal or none. Also, since the Lehigh Valley Health Department will be a public entity, its budget will consistently be subject to scrutiny by local officials and the general public.

**Why is it better to establish a regional health department instead of two separate county health departments?** There are a several reasons why it makes sense to take a bi-county approach. As already noted, public-health concerns do not stop at jurisdictional borders. So for example, a flu outbreak in one county would undoubtedly have a major effect on the neighboring county. Furthermore, an effective public-health department works closely with various key partners: hospitals; employers and business networks; major nonprofit service agencies (such as the Red Cross); and the local media. In the Lehigh Valley, these sectors work across both Lehigh and Northampton Counties. A bi-county health department thus would be ideally positioned to coordinate public-health efforts among these stakeholders.

*To learn more about the effort to establish a Lehigh Valley Health Department, visit [www.renewlv.org/health](http://www.renewlv.org/health), email [smartgrowth@renewlv.org](mailto:smartgrowth@renewlv.org) or call 484-893-1062.*