PLANNING A TOTAL ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

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Program planning is a basic responsibility of all environmental health administrators. Whether in a large municipal or state health department or a small county or semi-rural department, thoughtful and orderly planning is a necessary task if the administrator is to direct the environmental health program, rather than be directed by it.

The mechanics of program planning have been well described in the literature and in texts on public administration. They are familiar to most practitioners of environmental health. This discussion, therefore, will not deal with the fundamental steps of program planning, rather, it will stress some of the less apparent planning considerations which frequently have a great influence on the shape and direction of the final program.

The administrator must first of all recognize the possible conflict between the environmental health needs of the community as viewed by himself, as an environmental health professional, and as viewed by the citizens. The two points of view may vary considerably! The environmental health professional is accustomed to assessing environmental needs in terms of potential dangers of disease transmission, contamination, insanitation or other conditions with a known or probable effect on human health. Citizens, on the other hand, may show concern for entirely different reasons. Noise, odor, inconvenience, and cost may loom as important considerations in the mind of the average citizen. This is not to make light of the citizen's sense of values or to suggest a lack of interest or concern for serious health effects. It simply reflects the fact that the citizen and the environmentalist are viewing the community from positions which differ in terms of training, experience and overall understanding of environmental health.

When Philadelphia’s air pollution control program was first inaugurated it was very evident that the type of service in which the citizens were primarily interested was the investigation of complaints. To meet this demand, twenty-four hour, seven day a week field coverage was established with inspectors in radio controlled vehicles to provide rapid investigation of reported conditions involving excessive smoke, offensive odors or other air pollution problems. This extensive surveillance program has been effective in meeting a definite need and in learning much about the sources of air pollution problems throughout the city. Continuous surveillance is particularly useful in dealing with air pollution problems many of which arise from intermittent emissions which can sometimes be observed only if a field investigation is made promptly after the condition is reported.

It was necessary, however, for those responsible for the air pollution control program to recognize that this was not enough if the community’s air pollution problem was to be met. A complaint-centered program fails in that it deals with conditions only after a problem has developed; it is like fighting fires rather than preventing them! What was needed, in addition to an efficient complaint service, was a positive, engineering approach to the control and prevention of air pollution so as to bring about permanent improvements in air quality. The introduction of such activities as the review of plans for the installation of air pollution control devices and commercial fuel burning equipment, engineering surveys of major types of industries or industrial processes, and the provision of technical consultation on various aspects of air pollution control has given far better balance to the overall program. To accomplish this redirection of program it was necessary to release selected staff members from some of their responsibilities for daily program operations. Only through a positive decision to detach one or more persons from some or all of their operating duties can time be found to permit this type of planning and program development. If we permit ourselves to be absorbed by daily operations, there is no doubt that our total efforts can be consumed by these demands. Even in a one-man department, some fragment of time must be set aside to deal with overall program planning.

This type of resolution or compromise between agency views and community views is an essential aspect of program planning. In order to make intelligent decisions in these areas, the administrator must have knowledge of community views on environmental health needs. In addition to the many public contacts which are normal in the operation of any environmental health agency, a technique which may be especially helpful in determining community sentiment is the use of a citizen advisory...
committee. This type of citizen participation in an environmental health program has been described in a previous paper (1). A particular advantage of this approach is that it provides a two-way channel for communications by which the agency can not only learn what the community is thinking but also through which the agency can interpret to the community its plans, objectives and needs. Through the use of responsible and respected community leaders in this advisory role a better informed community may be developed, with a higher level of responsibility for achieving improved environmental standards. An informed community more likely will provide the continuing budget support so necessary to the administrator in carrying out a comprehensive environmental health program.

In addition to the differences between the environmental health wants of the citizens and the health department, conflicting values also may be found within the governmental family itself. Hence, the health department may seek additional funds with which to intensify its food sanitation program or to improve its industrial hygiene services only to find administration officials and legislative leaders more interested in an expanded rat control program or better radiation protection. The environmental health administrator should not be surprised by this reaction and may even find it helpful in learning more about community thinking, since political leaders frequently are very adept at knowing the wishes of the citizens. Where this conflict jeopardizes a program which he considers imperative, the administrator must resolve his differences with the political leaders through negotiation, persuasion and education. Similar conflicts may exist within the health department itself with the environmentalist facing competition from program directors in the other health disciplines. Here again, the administrator will find salesmanship, coupled with patience and perseverance, an important asset.

Not all of the conflict facing the administrator comes from external sources, since it will be found that frequently he must resolve conflicting values within himself as a preliminary to final program planning. For example, the administrator may wish to utilize specialized field personnel in order to have the maximum technical competence in the field to deal with the many technical problems confronting the present-day environmental health agency. The lack of sufficient numbers of technical specialists together with the need for more comprehensive field services has made it desirable for many administrators to utilize personnel on a generalized basis rather than as specialists. In this case, the practical gains offered by generalization, in terms of more intensive field coverage with reduced travel time and less duplication of effort, are of such immediate value as to offset the technical advantages of specialization. This is the type of compromise which every administrator must make with conflicting values.

Another example of compromise between two conflicting and partially desirable administrative patterns is the choice between centralization or decentralization of program operations. In facing this choice, many administrators will be tempted by the advantages of centralized program control since they feel they are better able to "keep their hand on the reins," and are more likely to have a successful program if they are able personally to make the numerous day-to-day decisions regarding operational aspects of their program.

The experience with decentralization of health services in the Philadelphia Department of Public Health is probably typical of other agencies where this issue has been faced (2). While it is perhaps still too early to assess decentralization in terms of improved quality of field services, there have been some distinct benefits to overall program operation. One important advantage has been the release of the technical specialists in the Division's central office from the burdens of directing daily operations. They are now able to spend more of their time on creative planning and program development, while dealing with technical problems as specialized consultants. In those program areas where decentralization has been minimal, the central office specialists still deal with many operational problems and frequently "just can't find the time" to devote to program development.

Another factor which does much to determine the final shape of the overall program is the weight of traditionalism. There is a real tendency for environmental health administrators to continue to carry out programs developed some years ago, while seldom, if ever, pausing to consider whether a program continues to serve a useful purpose, or whether the need which a program was established to meet still exists in the community. A recent report states that "... for a number of years, local health departments have devoted about forty per cent of their time to programs related to the safety of milk and food" (3). This does not leave much time with which to approach the newer problems which arise from the increasingly complex relationships between man and environment. A number of these were identified by the late Professor William C. Gibson (4) as: "expanding metropolitan centers; the competition for, and the conflicts arising from, the use of environmental resources of land, water and air for community development; the toxicological problems caused by nonliving contaminants in air and water; the potentially increased exposures to ionizing radiation; the changes
in the food production-processing-marketing cycle and the problem of chemical food additives; the unfolding epidemiology of viruses, helminths and fungi; and the devastating toll from the chronic diseases, mental abnormalities and accidents.”

In view of the findings of the Gross Committee (5) that, while many other disease rates have gone down, food-bornediseases have not declined in eight years, it is not suggested that less time be spent on food protection activities. If new responsibilities are to be met, greater resources must be made available for environmental health programs. If local agencies approach new demands by curtailing present activities, ineffective programs in both the traditional and newer program areas probably will result. What must be done, however, is to carefully appraise every program activity to determine its effectiveness and the need for its continuance. Care must be taken that “sacred cow” programs are not perpetuated long after their usefulness has passed and that “pet projects” of the administrator or the technical staff do not consume a disproportionate share of time and resources. Throughout the full spectrum of environmental health activities, we must seek new methods of operation, explore entirely new approaches with imagination and bring about program redirection as needed.

The resolution of competing program needs is a problem which complicates both planning and program operation. A common example is where existing codes or statutes require the quarterly inspection of restaurants and the inspection and approval of septic tank installations. If the availability of personnel and resources is such that both services cannot be sustained, it is clear that some administrative action must be taken to resolve the dilemma. Without wishing to split hairs or engage in semantics, it is suggested that a legislative action establishing a minimum frequency of inspection, but which is not accompanied by an appropriation measure to provide the manpower for its implementation, may be properly viewed by the administrator as directory rather than mandatory. In the light of this interpretation, the administrator is compelled to provide the service only to the extent permitted by other program needs.

Another basis for making a proper choice between competing needs is to consider the relative benefit to the community to be derived from each activity. Because of their basic orientation, health departments usually will give emphasis to preventive measures rather than to those of a largely regulatory nature. In the situation mentioned above, higher priority perhaps would be given to the inspection of septic tanks than the quarterly inspection of restaurants since a septic tank control program seeks to prevent the subsequent occurrence of severe sewage problems which have plagued so many urban and suburban communities. In this case the administrator is literally exercising the ancient adage, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

There are times, however, where in using this particular logic the administrator merely will deceive himself and render poor service to the community. From many previous unfortunate experiences, we have ample reason to recommend against the use of septic tanks in highly congested urban areas. If the environmentalist believes that the construction of sanitary sewers is the best answer to the community’s sewage disposal problem, should he not take a firm stand and initiate steps to prevent further construction on building sites which would require the use of septic tanks? If the community cannot look to its health department for this kind of leadership, to whom can it turn?

This discussion has attempted to explore some of the considerations and conflicts which must be faced in the planning and execution of an environmental health program. Program planning is not a decorative sophistication to be practiced when the demands of program operations slacken momentarily and allow a few idle moments for thought. To the contrary, planning is an essential element in a sound program for which sufficient time must be made available. Those who feel that planning is a superficial chore requiring only the manipulation of a few generalized formulas and mathematical factors will be disillusioned. Planning is a tough, demanding task requiring the full imagination and energy of even the most gifted administrator. Even when new proposals face opposition or rejection, the administrator must renew his planning efforts with persistence and determination. The opportunity to better meet the environmental needs of the community through improved program planning presents a real challenge to all of us engaged in the field of environmental health.

References