

Tracks: EPHT Massachusetts Case Study

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Narrator] Hello everyone. Thanks for tuning into the Tracks podcast, where we explore topics related to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network.

In 2006, Massachusetts was one of 16 states selected by CDC to develop a statewide Tracking Network. Recently Massachusetts launched its network, and I was able to catch up with Suzanne Condon, Associate Health Commissioner with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. I asked Suzanne who she believed would receive the greatest value from the network.

[Suzanne Condon] We’ve built a very strong team that has an incredible commitment to two major audiences. One, are those local health partners that we have. They have a really hard job. And so the goal was, how can we use and build a tracking network and build data systems that would ultimately reduce some of the pressure on them in terms of local decision making.

The second thing that we have an incredible commitment to is working closely with community residents. I learned many years ago in the early days of trying to best investigate the childhood leukemia problem in Woburn, Massachusetts, which became the subject of the movie and book *The Civil Action*, that when a child is diagnosed with a horrific disease, parents want answers. And sometimes those answers have taken far too long, too many years. And so, the idea of the Tracking Network becoming a reality provided us with the opportunity to say, ‘How can we make neighborhood level data available that was within the constraints of privacy regulations, privacy issues, but that would provide the community with readily available data.’

[Narrator] Suzanne believes community residents will benefit greatly from the Massachusetts Tracking Network.

[Suzanne Condon] When... if a child gets diagnosed with leukemia, for example, a parent wants to know, ‘How many other kids in my neighborhood? Does my neighborhood have a problem or did I just have some pretty bad luck?’ So, today, very soon over the next few weeks, people across Massachusetts will be able to look at our data, our public portal and essentially have that question answered.

[Narrator] So, why is tracking so important? One reason is Massachusetts ranks third in the United States for prevalence of asthma. When Massachusetts Tracking Program staff conducted asthma surveillance and indoor quality assessments in schools, a significant association between moisture and the prevalence of asthma was found. Based on tracking data, Massachusetts staff are working with school officials to correct the moisture problem and to enact policy changes for reducing mold and moisture in schools.

What part of the Tracking Network does Suzanne find most exciting?

[Suzanne Condon] I think being able to answer those questions from parents. From the time I was a very young researcher I used to get so frustrated having to tell a parent that we really wanted to answer their questions but we had 60 communities ahead of them. And a parent will always say, 'But my child is sick.' And unfortunately, in the field of environmental health, most of the people that come to talk to us are sick or have children that are sick. So it becomes this difficult process for environmental public health practitioners to try to figure out how to explain the lack of resources to people that are very concerned. So for me, the most exciting part is being able to have the public have the answers much quicker than they've ever had before.

[Narrator] I hope you've enjoyed this inside look at the Massachusetts Tracking Network, and how the data and information collected is being used to make a difference in the health of our communities. The Environmental Public Health Tracking Network: collecting and connecting data to improve your health.

Thanks for tuning in to this Tracks podcast focused on Massachusetts. Check out other episodes, including a look at the importance of partnerships and New York City's attempt to monitor rat populations using their own tracking portal.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.