



## The Benefits of Working Together

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Boards of health across the country have similar structures and missions—they promote health and disease prevention through their oversight of public health departments and programs. When they join together to promote a program or cause—whether it be addressing the H1N1 influenza epidemic, discouraging smoking, or supporting health care reform—their influence is magnified.

Julia Patterson, King County Council member and chair of the Seattle-King County Board of Health, recognized the impact of working collectively when she organized a recent press conference with five other Puget Sound boards of health. She invited her colleagues from Clark, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish, and Thurston counties to join her in a call for federal health reform. The board members communicated three messages:

- The current health system is not sustainable and too costly in terms of dollars and poor health outcomes
- Federal health reform is necessary to enable local governments to improve the health of local communities
- Given the economic crisis and the growing demand for services on the local level, federal health reform must move forward this year

Collectively, the six boards represent the health of over 60% of the population of the state of Washington. State and federal lawmakers attended the event, and video was sent to residents of all six counties, to the media, and to state and federal legislators.

Both state and federal legislators pay attention when local elected officials join together to promote a particular view or program. The response we received from U. S. Representative Jay Inslee (D-WA) to the press conference was characteristic. His local community liaison told us:

Although it seems as though there is not a clear connection between the federal government and the work that counties do, I can assure you that all of the information that you and your colleagues have provided about the day-to-day challenges you face at a local level have an incredible impact on what happens at the federal level. The meetings and information provided holds tremendous influence on how this debate progresses.

As to the long-term impact of this project, the press conference not only amplified the separate efforts of each board of health, the work done before, during, and after the event created new relationships and cemented others. The six boards are now poised to

expand their number and continue collaborating for the benefit of all of the communities they serve.

The experience of the King County Board of Health is not unique. Every region of the United States faces challenges, and adjacent counties and their respective boards of health often confront similar health problems. By working together, they can share their collective expertise and increase their effectiveness.

