

Building Genomics Capacity in the Public Health Workforce in Minnesota: Advice to the Minnesota Department of Health from Key People

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Background and objectives: Knowledge and capacity related to genetics and genomics are limited in the public health practice community. As genomics increasingly becomes an important tool for understanding and addressing population-based health issues, adequate capacity in genomics will need to be established in this community to meet this anticipated need. The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) has been awarded a five-year cooperative agreement with the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to build leadership and capacity in genomics in the public health workforce to assure appropriate integration of genomics into public health activities in Minnesota.

Methods: In order to better address the needs of this target audience, five telephone focus groups were held in May 2004 with 23 people including researchers, educators, public health practitioners, healthcare providers, and healthcare advocates from across Minnesota to solicit input to shape genomics capacity-building activities. Each focus group session consisted of between three and six people and had participants from varying backgrounds. Questions included: 1) What issues are important related to genomics? What are your concerns? 2) What role should MDH play related to genomics? 3) What gathering or meeting format do you find most useful? Issues related to genomics were ranked from one (not at all important) to five (extremely important).

Results: The three most important issues were 1) ethical, legal and social issues (ELSI) (4.8/5); 2) public policy issues related to genomics (4.3/5); and 3) genomics in health education, health promotion and disease prevention (4.0/5).

Discussion/Conclusion: Participants advised MDH to collaborate with other organizations to provide education and training to a variety of audiences, to provide support to public health practitioners to incorporate genomics into their existing programs, to maintain genomics data securely and to have a sound public health rationale for genomics data collection. Education should focus on basic genomics information, genomics in public health, ELSI, and updates on advances. Participants suggested that MDH support efforts for anticipating ELSI and assuring that public policies balance individual, research and public health priorities. Any meeting on genomics aimed at the public health community should have a defined audience, a clear purpose, a carefully considered venue and something special to attract the desired audience.