

Northwest **PUBLIC HEALTH**

Viewpoint: Technology and Public Health Workforce Development

Technology Is a Prime Component of Montana Public Health Training, by Senator Conrad Burns

The public health system is now facing new and unprecedented responsibilities in this post-9/11 world. In addition to fulfilling its traditional roles in preventing the spread of disease, promoting healthy lifestyles, protecting against environmental hazards, and ensuring needed health services, the public health system must now be ready to detect and respond to biological, chemical, and radiological events, and be prepared to assist communities in recovering from them.



Last May, my Washington, DC, staff met with several Montana public health advocates attending the National Turning Point Policy Summit. They discussed the importance of a vital public health system and some of the many state and local efforts to improve this system. I am impressed with all of the work that has gone into inventorying Montana's preparedness levels, preparing public health emergency response plans, and developing disease-monitoring and health system communication capabilities across the state. I was encouraged by some of the workforce development efforts—the Montana Public Health Training Institute is an outstanding example of state agency and university system collaboration in training our public health professionals. Resources and support provided by the University of Washington and Montana State University personnel helped to make this annual event successful.

Unfortunately, at the very time our public health and safety infrastructure is facing major funding challenges, our state governments are experiencing a major budget crunch. My home state of Montana is certainly going through such a time, and our state legislature will continue to wrestle with unprecedented deficits because of a tough economic climate. The state of California alone, for example, is facing a deficit of over \$30 billion. There are no easy answers, but in spite of these difficulties, we need to continue to work toward funding our public health infrastructure.

I feel strongly that Montana must support our public health workforce with adequate training and technology. Although many urban and suburban areas have access to broadband connections, many rural areas across the country and in Montana do not, which places those rural communities at a disadvantage with regard to such things as economics, education, and health care. We need to create a financial incentive to encourage broadband providers to extend their networks into rural communities and other under-served areas so we can help overcome that disadvantage.

I believe exciting opportunities are on the horizon using the latest technologies to offer training and education across our state so that more public health workers have access to the most current information. The benefits that states such as Montana will experience with these new capabilities are innumerable. They will provide a cost-effective option to facilitate the exchange of ideas in cases where it may not have been possible before. This is extremely helpful for rural communities that often struggle to keep up with more urban areas. I am happy to know that with the help of these new technologies, many rural areas in my state and beyond will now have access to speakers and events without having to travel long distances to get that access. I am committed to working to make sure all our communities in Montana are on the same playing field, and it pleases me to know that technological developments help to reach that end.

I am proud of what you all do, and I will continue working with state, local, and tribal public health agencies to address issues related to distance learning and adequate technology for our public health system. Securing our homeland is a priority for me, and it is critical we all work together to ensure our state is safe and secure from all types of threats now and in the future.

Thank you all for the hard work that you do for Montana.

Author

Conrad Burns represents Montana in the United States Senate.

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