

# Northwest PUBLIC HEALTH

## The Montana Health Alert Network

by **James Aspevig**

The Montana State Department of Public Health and Human Services works with 50 independent county health departments. Their independence, coupled with population-based funding disparities, makes a recommendation by the state that county health departments adopt an expensive/proprietary communications technology both politically and financially untenable. As a result, HAN implementation in Montana is based on three principles: sustainability, multiple-use, and leveraging the Internet-based component of the HAN architecture to promote partnerships with other public and private organizations.

Sustainability is supported by recommending applications that transform local agencies' Internet connections into a crucial element of their day-to-day work. A second factor supporting sustainability is affordability. This usually requires negotiations between the HAN coordinator and each county government to ensure that the county can afford to assume the costs of the proposed type of connection should federal funding be reduced.

The principles of multiple-use and of leveraging public/private partnerships are best illustrated by the array of Web-based projects currently being developed or deployed by the Department. These Internet-based projects include an integrated statewide Immunization Registry, two Maternal and Child Health Data Systems, and an HIV/AIDS project management system to evaluate and provide reimbursement to private and public contractors. We also anticipate adopting CDC's NEDSS platform as widely as possible. As Montana's physical infrastructure expands, our HAN and distance-learning coordinators are working together to develop a technology-training curriculum, emphasizing the basic skills of immediate utility to public health practitioners.

Montana HAN's reliance on the Internet as the backbone for communication, principally through e-mail, provides a unique opportunity to upgrade the business efficiency of county health departments while developing a multipurpose infrastructure that will support the delivery of Web-based client management systems, distance learning, and communications.

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