

Incubator projects help counties share ideas, resources to improve public health

Tobacco is banned on school campuses in four North Carolina counties, thanks to programs started by local health departments who shared their ideas and pooled their resources to develop an anti-smoking campaign for youth in their areas.

The “Touch No Tobacco (TNT)” initiative was a cooperative effort undertaken by North Carolina health departments working in conjunction with the UNC School of Public Health’s North Carolina Institute for Public Health — the service and outreach arm of the School, and the North Carolina Division of Public Health. The TNT project, which is funded by the North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund, is one of several “incubator” projects coordinated by the Institute.

The two-year-old incubator initiative, funded this year with \$1 million in recurring funds from the North Carolina General Assembly, develops voluntary partnerships among local health departments and public health stakeholders to



PHOTO: (left to right) Crystal Dempsey, Youth Tobacco Prevention Coordinator; Northampton High School East students Melva Lowe and Quante Wilder; and Northampton High School West students Keandra Robinson, Adren Underdue, and Keith Moody present tobacco prevention information to the Northampton County School Board.

establish and enhance essential public health services, particularly for under-resourced counties.

“The incubators provide an extremely effective way for counties to share ideas and help each other find resources for programs like

‘Touch No Tobacco,’” said Leah Devlin, N.C. State Health Director. “The result is that, working together, we can do more to protect and improve public health in our state.”

Last year, the incubator initiative provided grant-writing resources for county health department workers in 11 North Carolina counties that allowed them to successfully pursue funding from the North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund to develop tobacco use prevention and cessation projects in their schools.

The counties used these funds to launch the “TNT” initiative among high schools (19) and middle schools (26) in their counties. Youth involved in the TNT projects in Currituck, Dare, North Hampton, and Warren counties convinced their county school boards, through lively presentations, to adopt tobacco-free policies on school campuses. The other counties participating in the TNT project are Beaufort, Bertie, Camden, Edgecombe, Hyde, Martin, and Pasquotank.

“This is an example of counties coming together as an incubator and leveraging state funds to secure additional funds,” says John Graham, the project’s coordinator and the

deputy director of the Institute, which manages the funds for the TNT project and will later coordinate an evaluation of individual incubator projects as well as an evaluation of the overall initiative.

in the initiative. Sixty-five of the state's 100 counties have joined incubators, including nearly all of the poorest counties.

"These incubators represent an exceptional opportunity to strengthen public health

cross-county collaboration," Baker adds. "There is nothing like it anywhere else in the country."

Over the last year, several incubator projects have addressed aspects of North Carolina's public health accreditation initiative to assure that health departments have the capacity to provide consistent essential services. Others have surveyed and evaluated billing and information system policy and procedures and are now introducing best practices across member agencies. A standard approach to community assessment, a new employee orientation, and a CD-based board of health orientation — all developed by the incubators — are presently being piloted and later will be made available to incubator members and to North Carolina's health departments more generally.

"We believe the incubator slogan "Better Together" is born out in the results of incubator activities over the last year," Graham notes. "We expect these collaborative efforts to grow stronger in the coming year."

For more information on the North Carolina Institute for Public Health, visit their Web site at www.sph.unc.edu/nciph.

“The incubator initiative is an innovative approach that brings underserved counties together to pool resources and strengthen existing services or introduce new essential services.”

The incubator initiative unites counties so they can share ideas and resources and also collectively apply for grants.

"As a group, they have more resources to develop grant proposals and they are also more attractive to funding agencies," Graham says.

Presently, five incubator groups ranging in size from eight to 19 counties are participating

infrastructure from the ground level, and the Institute is delighted to be working with local health departments and the North Carolina Division of Public Health to foster greater collaboration and a more efficient and effective use of resources," says Dr. Ed Baker, the Institute's director.

"Part of the uniqueness of this project is its