



Department of Health
Agency of Human Services



Town Health Officers Serve a Vital Role for the Health Department

Learn about your Town Health Officer During National Public Health Week April 5-9

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BURLINGTON – Heaped trash, lead paint, rats, mold and failed septic systems are among the issues that may trigger a response by a town health officer.

Town health officers in Vermont are a select group of volunteers with a wide range of skills. The health officer for one town may be a welder, in another town the health officer may be a doctor. They play an essential role in their communities to protect the public health.

Carrie Johnson, a deputy health officer in the small town of Georgia, Vt., also serves as the town administrator. She defines her role for the Health Department as “other duties assigned” in addition to her regular job.

“The majority of the cases investigated by either myself or the town health officer, Cindy Deyak, involve garbage complaints and failed septic systems,” Johnson said, “In addition, we have investigated potential violations of the Rental Housing Code and animal cruelty complaints.”

A town health officer is appointed by the health commissioner at the recommendation of the town’s select board for a three-year term, or until a successor is appointed. The town health officer and the selectboard (or city council) make up the local board of health, which has extensive authority to enforce state health regulations and local health ordinances.

Duties include investigating and mitigating potential public health hazards. An example of a public health hazard at the local level could include no heat in rental housing during the winter.

The Health Department is working to leverage the information age and better connect and train town health officers. A town health officer manual, trainings, presentations, an e-mail listserve, and podcasts are available at healthvermont.gov. The Health Department is collaborating with the Vermont Leagues of Cities and Towns to offer a workshop specifically for health officers on May 5 at the Capitol Plaza Hotel in Montpelier.

Health Commissioner Wendy Davis, MD said that health officers need to have a unique skill set that enables them to act as mediators, resolve disputes, and mitigate risks.

“The role of the town health officer has increasingly become more complex, and we’re very appreciative of the work they do,” Dr. Davis said. “We depend on their perspective in situations where knowing the town and the people involved is pivotal to how we respond.”

For more information on Town Health Officers visit healthvermont.gov. You can also follow us on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/healthvermont>.

For more information on National Public Health Week “*A Healthier America, One Community at a Time*” visit: www.nphw.org.

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