

Minnesota Common Ground: Transforming Public Health Information Systems

Common Ground Overview

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Issues Facing Current Public Health Information Systems

Public health agencies depend on timely and accurate information in order to effectively serve their communities, to promote health, and to make informed decisions that protect the public from health harms. Many public health agencies are evaluating their current information systems and needs in order to improve their ability to detect, assess, and respond to a wide range of public health risks. The challenge facing public health is that current public health information systems often fail to meet their agencies' needs and do not provide interconnectivity with other public health agencies and the health care system – functions that are critical to promoting and protecting the public's health.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recognized this need and launched the Common Ground grant program with the goal to accelerate the innovative and effective use of information technology by state and local public health agencies. They seek to change how public health information systems are conceived and developed—by transforming from a stand-alone environment to one that acts collaboratively to design systems that meet the needs of public health agencies and the public they serve. Recent developments in health information technology create tremendous opportunities for public health agencies. Common Ground will build on these developments to help public health agencies improve their business processes and enhance the way they communicate and work with the health care system.

Transforming Public Health Information Systems

In December 2006, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) awarded grants to 31 public health agencies throughout the country. The Public Health Informatics Institute serves as the *Common Ground* National Program Office, guiding grantees in two areas:

Informatics Capacity: Grantees will analyze their agency's business processes related to a specific public health problem and create a plan for future requirements development.

Requirements Development: Grantees will apply a proven methodology to analyze their business processes and define system requirements. These grantees will focus their work in one of two areas: chronic disease prevention and control or public health preparedness. RWJF awarded 16 grants for 36 months. The Minnesota Department of Health received a requirements development grant in the chronic disease prevention and control focus area.

Working collaboratively is the key to developing information system requirements that support a public health agency's work.

The overarching principle of the RWJF program is that public health agencies do essentially the same kind of work throughout the country and function in many similar ways.



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Finding this “common ground” will help agencies share their experiences and best practices, address common approaches to problems, and develop common business processes.

National Goals of Common Ground
The National goals for Common Ground are to:

- **Persuade** public health agencies to integrate informatics principles and sound development methodologies to improve the delivery of public health services.
- **Examine** public health agencies’ existing business processes – and define requirements for the information systems used to support these processes.
- **Help** agencies develop new information system requirements that are more effective and that streamline the delivery of essential public health services.
- **Minimize** duplicative efforts by identifying common business processes and information system requirements that are applicable across the public health field.
- **Encourage** stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels to endorse, adopt, and implement redesigned business processes and information system requirements that support public health preparedness and chronic disease prevention and control.

Minnesota Goals

In addition to the goals of Common Ground, MDH has following goals:

- **Increase** the informatics knowledge and skills with a core team of MDH staff who can facilitate Business

Process Analysis and Requirements Definition with projects at the state and local levels.

- **Create** a roadmap and strategic plan for achieving greater harmonization and interoperability across chronic disease information systems.
- **Communicate** the benefits of informatics principles to key public health staff in order to increase the understanding of the need for improved public health information systems.