

100 Years

of Public Health in Arkansas



Old State House, original site of the Arkansas Department of Health

The Arkansas Department of Health traces its history back 100 years to February 25, 1913, when the first permanent state Board of Health was established. Over the last 100 years, public health advancements – including controlling contagious diseases, immunizing children and adults, preventing infant deaths, providing good prenatal care to expectant moms, assuring safer food and drinking water – have added 25 years to the life expectancy in the United States.

● **Chronic Disease**

Early public health services that once centered on infectious diseases gradually shifted toward chronic diseases and addressed nutritional deficiencies like pellagra and rickets. By the end of the 20th century, obesity and smoking and the staggering impact of diabetes, heart disease, and stroke moved chronic disease prevention and treatment to a top priority.

● **Environmental Health**

In the early 1900s, lack of proper sanitation frequently led to widespread hookworm infections and outbreaks of waterborne illness. Protective health codes and improved sanitation measures now ensure safer drinking water – often cited as one of the greatest advancements in public health – milk and food.

● **Family Health**

A century ago, for every 1,000 live births, approximately 100 infants died before age one, and nine women died of pregnancy-related complications. Today, death rates have declined more than 90 percent for mothers and babies, but maternal and infant mortality rates are still unacceptably high in Arkansas. Efforts to improve the life of baby, mother, and family continue.

● **Emergency Preparedness**

Some might imagine that emergency preparedness, as we think of it today, became a major responsibility of the Department of Health following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In fact, emergency planning and response have been public health concerns since early in the 20th century. As with 9/11, external events – floods, earthquakes, pandemics, and man-made threats – have dictated the actions the Department has taken to protect Arkansans.

Arkansas Department of Health
1913 - 2013

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● **Immunizations**

For much of Arkansas's history, its citizens have been at the mercy of infectious diseases. With better understanding of how diseases are spread, more legislative and financial support, and cautious acceptance by citizens, the development and use of vaccinations became a defining characteristic of the 20th century.

● **Infectious Disease**

As formidable as any other threat to the pioneers in the new Arkansas Territory was the threat of infectious diseases like smallpox, yellow fever, and measles and malaria epidemics. Board of Health regulations for education, testing, treatment and public health inspections led to major improvements in Arkansas's fight against infectious diseases.

● **Local Public Health**

County health officers and nurses carried out inspections, conducted sanitary surveys, and maintained records as early as 1913. Today, 93 local health units currently provide more than 100 services in the state's 75 counties.

● **Public Health Laboratory**

The first State Health Department laboratory was established in 1913 and was located on the second floor of what is now the Old State House Museum in downtown Little Rock. The laboratory is currently housed in a state-of-the-art structure where approximately 800,000 lab tests are done each year.

● **Minority Health**

Over the last 30 years progress been made to address health disparities and health equity among the state's minority populations. Minority health outreach has broadened to include Latinos, Marshallese, HIV-infected individuals and others disproportionately affected.

In recent years, the Health Department has worked to pass the Clean Indoor Air Act, create a statewide trauma system, construct a state-of-the-art public health laboratory, and expand the mass flu clinics and school flu clinics throughout the state. We will continue to strengthen our efforts to improve oral health and reduce obesity, tobacco use, chronic diseases, teen pregnancies and infant deaths. Public health professionals and our partners across our state are working hard every day to keep our hometowns healthy.

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