

Environmental Health Timeline

100 Years of Public Health



1893 – Arkansas passed the first law on adulterated – impure, unsafe, or unwholesome – foods.

Early 1900s – Lack of proper sanitation led to widespread hookworm infection and outbreaks of waterborne illness such as dysentery, typhoid fever, and cholera.

1911 to 1912 – Sanitary surveys of approximately 7,500 rural homes in Arkansas showed nearly half had privies without “protection from flies, insects, fowl, and domestic animals,” while the other half had “no closet conveniences at all.”

Over the next several years, the Hookworm Eradication Program and public health workers educated the public about transmission, tested and treated infected individuals, and made initial steps in cleaning and maintaining privies.

1914 – U.S. Public Health Service set forth standards that regulated drinking water systems that provided water to interstate carriers such as ships and trains and only applied to infectious contaminants.

1917 – Legislation created the Bureau of Sanitary Engineering within the Health Department while the Hotel Inspection Act required the inspection of all food establishments for sanitary conditions.

The Bureau of Sanitary Engineering worked to provide oversight that would help eliminate waterborne illness outbreaks and increase access to safe drinking water. The Hotel Inspection Act required the inspection of all the state’s food establishments, hotels, schools, creameries, dairies, and other institutions for sanitary conditions.

1920s – Bauxite, Arkansas, became pivotal in the research that would eventually lead to the discovery

of the benefits of fluoridation in the reduction of tooth decay.

1935 to 1942 – The Works Progress Administration and the Health Department built 51,418 free privies for families needing to improve sanitation around homes.

1940s to 1960s – Food safety and sanitation concerns rose as non-professional canneries and subdivisions began to develop in rural areas.

Non-professional canneries frequently lacked clean water, proper waste disposal, hand washing facilities, increasing the threat of foodborne illness. Lots in subdivisions were often too small for proper septic tank waste dispersal, resulting in frequent surface and ground water sewage contamination. Further complicating the issue was Arkansas’s varied landscape. Runoff was frequent, as mountainous areas typically didn’t have enough topsoil to absorb the septic tank waste, while flatlands were too water-saturated to absorb the waste, causing surface contamination.

Late 1940s – The first state plumbing code was developed and first efforts to promote fluoridation of drinking water began.

1945 – Grand Rapids, Michigan, became the first city in the world to purposely fluoridate its public water system.

Over the course of 15 years, researchers monitored cavity rates in the city’s 30,000 school-age children. The researchers found that the rate of dental caries among children was reduced by more than 60 percent.

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



Environmental Health Timeline continued

1950 – West Helena became the first public water system in Arkansas to fluoridate.

1951 – Act 200 established the Plumbing and Natural Gas Section at the Department to reduce public health hazards associated with improperly installed plumbing systems.

1953 – Act 415 passed under the general provisions of the Arkansas Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act and allowed the Health Department free access to all facilities where food was manufactured, processed, packed or held for public consumption and required licensing of all food establishments.

1950s to early 1960s – The Little Rock Grade “A” Program ensured safe and sanitary milk.

During this time, nearly 95 percent of all milk produced in the state was sent to Little Rock for processing.

1961 – The director of Little Rock Grade “A” expanded a program at the Health Department to regulate the remaining five percent of Arkansas’s dairies milk that did not ship to Little Rock for processing.

1970s – Septic tank malfunctions continued statewide and the Board of Health began regulation efforts.

Malfunctioning septic tanks resulted in Health Department sanitarians taking an average of 10,000 complaint calls during the early 1970s. Throughout the decade, the Department regulated septic tank installation to varying degrees. These regulations were difficult to enforce and were unpopular with builders.

1973 – Improvements in water quality regulations over the last 20 years resulted in nearly 83 percent of the state’s population having access to safe drinking water.

1974 – Congress passed the Safe Drinking Water Act.

1977 – The Arkansas General Assembly passed Act 402 which regulated the “location, construction, installation, operations, and maintenance of individual sewage disposal systems and other alternate methods of sewage disposal systems” and would be the basis of the current on-site wastewater program.

1977 – The Health Department took over the Little Rock Grade “A” Milk Program, and placed the Milk Laboratory in the public health laboratory.

1982 – The Rules and Regulations Pertaining to Tattoo Establishments went into effect. Later that year, the first licensed tattoo shop in Arkansas opened.

1991 – Act 277 created the Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration (HVAC/R) Program that required licensing and code enforcement within the HVAC/R industry.

2001 – Legislation established the Office of Oral Health within the Health Department.

Major efforts toward improving oral health in Arkansans of all ages – particularly children – followed shortly thereafter. Despite these efforts, state oral health assessments found alarming oral health issues in all Arkansans relating to access to dental care and fluoridated water.

2011 – The Arkansas General Assembly passed SB 359 mandating fluoridation of all water systems serving 5,000 people or more.

As a result of this legislation, Arkansans who have access to fluoridated water has increased from 65 percent to almost 87 percent and will help further reduce dental caries in Arkansans of all ages.

