

News

The Public Health Law Association: A New Partnership in Public Health Practice

**Robert M. Pestronk, Cynthia Honssinger
and Montrece Ransom**

Law is fundamental to the origin, practice, and understanding of public health services. Law improves the likelihood that residents of local, state, national and international communities can lead healthy, long, and productive lives. Better understanding of the law, and the role of attorneys in support of their public health clientele, improves the public's health. An association which affords opportunity for lawyers and other practitioners in the public health system to learn each other's cultures and share one another idea's and research can improve the practice of both law and the public's health.

BACKGROUND

In the spring of 2001; the United States Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention assembled representatives from academia, non-profit organizations, and governmental public health agencies of federal, state, and local jurisdiction to explore the nexus of law and the public's health. Among the gaps identified was the lack of any organization through which those with a specific interest in using the law to improve the public's health might collectively work.

As a follow-up to this meeting, the authors of this paper were asked to facilitate discussion among those attending the public health law conference, "The Public's Health and the Law in the 21st Century," held in Atlanta, Georgia in June 2002. The topic for discussion was the extent of interest in creating a venue for interaction among public health attorneys and their clients. More than 90 people participated in the meeting, including health directors and practitioners, attorneys who provide legal counsel

to local, state, and federal public health agencies, academicians, and a small number of policy makers. Nearly 50 attendees continued to attend ad hoc discussion sessions hurriedly organized at the conference because of the overwhelming interest in such a venue.

As a result of these meetings, the group learned that many public health attorneys and their clients—state and local health officials—were concerned about the absence of a network and forum for public health attorneys to exchange information and strengthen their practice. They discussed the needs of potential core members who may be served by such an organization, its purpose and goals, its potential membership and activities, options for the form of the organization, and the appropriate next steps.

To bring the organization to life, nine volunteers¹ formed an "Executive Committee" whose work over the past year resulted in the official launch of the Public Health Law Association, a 501(C)3 corporation, at the second annual conference, "The Public's Health and the Law", held in June 2003 in Atlanta, Georgia. At this second conference, approximately 100 individuals signed up as charter members of the new Association.

THE ASSOCIATION

As stated in the by-laws of the new Association, the mission of the Public Health Law Association is to promote healthy people in healthy communities through dialogue, partnerships, education, and research in public health law. Among the expected members of the Association are those who make the law, those who execute and administer it, those who practice and study the law, and others who find interest in the law as a means to improve the public's health.

The newly elected Board and Officers of the Association,² along with an active membership, hope to support

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products and services through which may be developed peer-to-peer relationships, better-informed practice models, and improved working relationships and knowledge among practitioners and attorneys.

For the cost of approximately thirty cents a day, charter memberships continue to be available through December 2003 at a rate of \$100 for public sector employees. Student memberships are available for \$15. Others including private attorneys, academics, and non-profit organization representatives may join for \$150. Additional information about membership, including membership enrollment forms, may be found at the following website: www.turningpointprogram.org/phlaw. Board members and officers will serve voluntarily and be elected annually, on a staggered basis, to afford members an opportunity to offer expertise and service to peers and manage the affairs of the organization.

PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

Of immediate benefit have been two teleconferences bringing together, respectively, several hundred people to hear from and question attorneys and practitioners who have been at the cutting edge of practice following the SARS and Monkeypox outbreaks in Canada and the United States. An e-mail listserv has been introduced offering those who subscribe a means to interact with colleagues concerning legal issues or any other topic of professional interest. Information about subscription to the listserv may be found at the website noted above. Additional products and services are envisioned based upon interest of and

support from members including a regular newsletter, sponsored research and dissemination of results, production of an annual conference, additional teleconferences and web-casts on topics with immediate currency, and a printed review of cases and commentary of interest to the community of practitioners.

CONCLUSION

Recent events have once again reminded public health officials, policy makers, those who conduct research into the legal aspects of practice, attorneys whose practice serves the public health workforce, and community members of the importance of law as a tool to serve and advance the public's health. The new Public Health Law Association provides an important venue in which these practitioners can learn from one another to serve a shared goal.

REFERENCES

1. Nancy Dillingham, Cynthia Honssinger, Tony Moulton, Anne Murphy, Dan O'Brien, Jean O'Connor, Robert Pestronk, Judith W. Munson, Montrece Ransom, Susan Steeg; Tony Moulton and Montrece Ransom as ad-hoc members
2. Nancy Dillingham JD, Larry Gostin JD, Cynthia Honssinger JD (Vice President), Anne Murphy JD, Dan O'Brien JD, Jean O'Connor JD MPH (Treasurer), Robert Pestronk MPH (President), Lorraine Spencer JD, Susan Steeg JD (Secretary)