**Policy Statement**

**CLHO Committee:** Communicable Disease

**Policy Statement:** The Coalition of Local Health Officials (CLHO) supports a robust Public Health Lab as a vital component of the Oregon public health system.

**Policy Positions:** CLHO Supports Legislation that:

* Provides sufficient funding for the Oregon State Public Health Laboratory (OSPHL) and increased capacity for ongoing improvements of the OSPHL
* Protects the vital role of the OSPHL within the public health system
* Sustains capacity for laboratory services necessary for public health surveillance and disease control

**Public Health Issue that Policy Statement is Addressing:**

* Infectious disease control
* Clinical and environmental testing
* A robust public health lab that protects and improves the health of the community through a unique set of laboratory services aimed at addressing needs of the population as a whole.
* Decreased funding at national, state, and local levels, means many public health labs are unable to perform the full spectrum of services needed to support public health.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Justification (data supporting the need to work on this issue):**

The Oregon State Public Health Laboratory (OSPHL) has actively protected the public's health since 1903 by supporting state and local infectious disease control efforts, preventing metabolic disorders detectable at birth, and assuring the quality of testing in clinical and environmental laboratories.[[2]](#footnote-2) The OSPHL provides a wealth of knowledge that is necessary to the governmental public health system, such as providing subtyping results during flu season, identifying emerging pathogens, and assuring that specific strains of diseases are identified, a service that fewer and fewer clinical labs are able or willing to provide.

In 2016, Oregon state and local health departments investigated 303 acute and communicable disease outbreaks and 135 outbreaks were confirmed.[[3]](#footnote-3) Each time a communicable disease is reported, the local public health system works to assess the case and look for risk factors. The public health lab plays a vital role in ensuring limited local public health resources are targeted at actual outbreaks and align with community needs and that cases with common sources of infection are linked together.

**Role of Local Public Health (promising practice/ evidenced-based work)**

In Oregon, the State Public Health Lab is an important community resource for several important reasons:

* Connects to the local public health system (enters information into ORPHEUS)
* Quickly identifies outbreaks through rapid and precise bacterial subtyping, ensuring efficient use of local public health resources by aiding in the identification of clusters and outbreaks
* Conducts confirmatory testing to identify outbreaks
* Staff possess unique expertise to identify emerging and resurging diseases

According to ORS 433.012,“The Oregon Health Authority shall provide the necessary laboratory examinations requested by local health departments for the diagnosis of communicable diseases identified by rule of the authority to be a reportable disease.” This important link between the OSPHL and local public health ensures that limited local public health staff capacity is dedicated to actual outbreaks of disease. The accurate testing the OSPHL provides can rule out assumed connections, identify different strains of a disease, and identify other connections between cases that are not otherwise readily apparent (aka clusters). The OSPHL also can forward specimens to the CDC for additional confirmatory testing.

This connection to local public health has been essential for high profile outbreaks, where time and resources need to be deployed accurately and with precision, especially in nursing homes, schools, and other congregate settings. Measles and meningococcal disease, for example, require accuracy and rapid response. Due to limited funding, however, the OSPHL does not do testing for mumps or IgM and IgG antibody testing for measles; currently they must send specimens to Washington state. Another major gap lies in the inability to test environmental samples during outbreak; almost all non-case samples related to outbreak investigations must be sent out-of-state.

Unlike clinical labs, the public health lab serves the statewide community rather than individual patients. In addition to the identification of disease outbreaks, this includes testing for diseases that are too rare to be identified by other labs and testing for diseases in populations that may not be able to pay for or access medical services. Thus the OSPHL is an important tool both for supporting emergency response and for addressing health equity and access.

**Connection to Modernization Manual Foundational Programs/ Capabilities**

Foundational Programs:

Access to Clinical Preventative Services

Communicable Disease

Environmental Health

Health Promotion & Prevention

Foundational Capabilities:

Assessment & Epidemiology

Policy & Planning

Leadership & Organizational

Health Equity

Communications

Community Partnerships

Emergency Preparedness

References used in developing this Policy Statement:

1. https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2014/07/08/14/15/the-role-of-the-public-health-laboratory-and-the-definition-of-public-health-laboratory-services [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/LABORATORYSERVICES/Pages/index.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.oregon.gov/OHA/PH/DISEASESCONDITIONS/COMMUNICABLEDISEASE/DISEASESURVEILLANCEDATA/WEEKLY-MONTHLYSTATISTICS/Documents/2016/December\_2016\_Monthly.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)