

NEWSLink

For and about the people and programs of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

2008 in Review

2008 Shows Crucial Role of Public Health, Heralds Change for Colorado's Public Health System

by Jan Stapleman

Although political candidates nearly wore out the term “change” during the 2008 campaign, it endures as the best one-word description of the past year’s events and a harbinger of 2009. Public health blipped onto the state’s radar screen early in 2008 and shifted into a state of flux at the year’s end.

Salmonella Crisis Spotlights Public Health

Coloradans hadn’t cleared the first quarter of 2008 when a crisis in Alamosa reminded them why the state needs a strong public health system. In mid-March, the department got word that several Alamosa residents had tested positive for *Salmonella* infection. As more cases popped up, an investigation pointed to the city’s water system as the source.

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment ordered the city to issue a bottled water advisory, and that commodity quickly disappeared from the city’s store shelves. The department’s Emergency Preparedness and Response Division assisted the Colorado Division of Emergency Management in getting water, personnel, equipment and other resources to the southern Colorado town. Thirty-eight department employees hit the road to help out there for at least a day, pitching in with such tasks as handing out bottled water and distributing flyers to keep residents informed.

After an eight-day chlorine flush of the city’s water system, Gov. Bill Ritter declared the city’s water safe to drink on April 11.

By May 1, Alamosa had reported 417 cases of *Salmonella* infection, 116 of which were confirmed by laboratory testing. Twenty people were hospitalized, and one person who suffered from a serious, pre-existing health problem died.

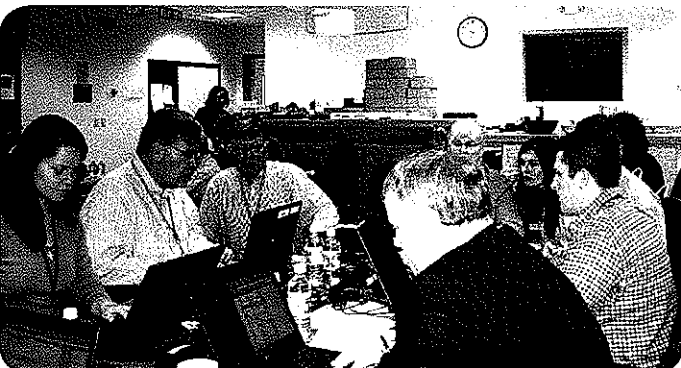
During the crisis, more than 30 agencies, from metropolitan water districts and local public health departments to state agencies and congressional offices, joined in efforts to combat the outbreak.

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BOTTLED
WATER
ADVISORY

An electronic sign warns Alamosa residents and visitors to drink only bottled water during the outbreak of *Salmonella* infection last spring.



Clockwise, from left, Dana Erpelding, Gerrit Bakker, Andy Kissel, Koral O'Brien, Natalya Verscheure, Chris Lindley and Ned Calonge staff the Department Operations Center during the *Salmonella* crisis in Alamosa.

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Executive Director **Jim Martin** and Chief Medical Officer **Ned Calonge** coordinated with the governor's office on the state response and provided numerous media interviews. The Executive Director's Office and eight of the department's divisions responded, including Consumer Protection, Disease Control and Environmental Epidemiology, Emergency Preparedness and Response, Hazardous Materials and Waste Management, Health Facilities and Emergency Medical Services, Laboratory Services, Prevention Services and Water Quality Control.

Department Garners Praise for Efforts Above and Beyond

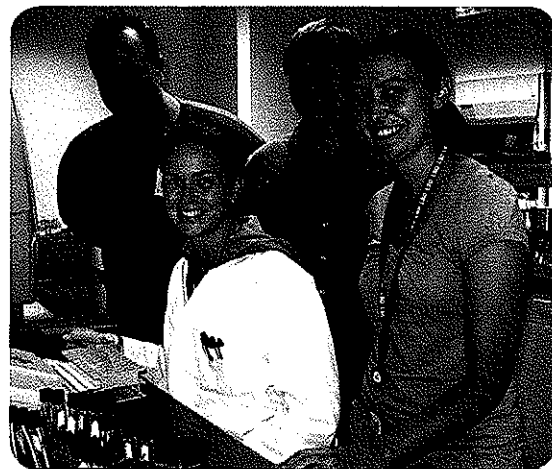
On May 30, Gov. Bill Ritter dropped by to thank employees for their response to the Alamosa crisis. Noting that public employees sometimes get a bad rap, Ritter thanked employees for the "air of selflessness" he witnessed when he stopped by the Department Operations Center during the crisis to visit department employees staffing the center over the Easter holiday weekend. At the June 18 Board of Health meeting, 59 department employees received Gold Star Awards for their efforts to resolve the crisis.



From left, Univision cameraman Carlos Rausseo interviews Mauricio Palacio, director of the Office of Health Disparities, March 21. Palacio provided information in Spanish about the Salmonella outbreak in Alamosa.

Source of Salmonella Encore Nailed Down at State Lab

Meanwhile, a second wave of *Salmonella* infection spread across the United States and spilled over Colorado's borders. The outbreak, which had sickened more than 1,300 people nationwide by mid-July, first was attributed to tomatoes. But over time, investigations by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and multiple state health



From left, Dave Heltzel, Mary Kate Cichon, Justin Nucci and Melissa Jett Nucci of the Laboratory Services Division linked a jalapeno pepper that sickened a Colorado man to the nationwide outbreak of illness from Salmonella Saintpaul. Not shown is Skip Gossack, who also played a role in the testing.

departments found links to jalapeno and Serrano peppers as well.

Laboratory Services personnel cracked the case July 25, when they confirmed that a jalapeno pepper obtained from an ill man in Montezuma County matched the DNA "fingerprint" of the *Salmonella* Saintpaul strain responsible for the outbreak. Disease Control and Environmental Epidemiology had obtained the pepper and handed it off to Laboratory Services, where three separate labs—environmental microbiology, public health microbiology and molecular science—collaborated to complete various phases of the testing. The Colorado investigation was the first to show a direct link between this particular outbreak in humans and a food product.

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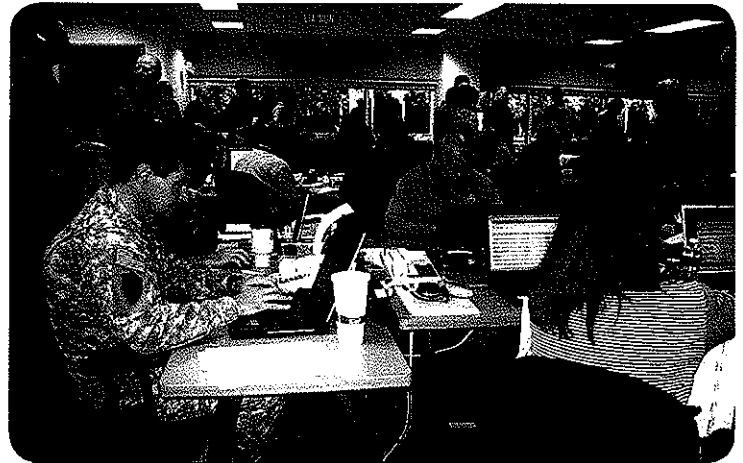
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comments and suggestions.

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DNC Draws Unprecedented Crowds

The Democratic Party convened about 70,000 of its closest friends at Denver's Pepsi Center for the Democratic National Convention Aug. 25-28. On the final day of the convention, now president-elect Barack Obama accepted his party's nomination in a speech at INVESCO Field at Mile High before a record crowd of 84,000 people. Colorado officials prepared for months to host this massive influx of people, planning for but hoping against the possibility of such crises as medical emergencies and terrorist attacks.



A Joint Operations Center operated 24-7 at the department during the Democratic National Convention in August. The center's purpose was to respond to any public health emergencies that might arise from the massive influx of people.

Employees from the Emergency Preparedness and Response Division, members of the surveillance group in Disease Control and Environmental Epidemiology, department public information officers and members of the Communications Office staffed a Joint Operations Center 24 hours a day Aug. 22-29. They were joined by personnel from other local, state and federal agencies. Personnel at the center were prepared to respond to any public health emergencies that might arise, but encountered a generally quiet convention week.

Department Hosts Thank-You Party for Employees

On Oct. 29, the department honored its employees for their commitment, expertise and hard work throughout the year at an Employee Appreciation Day lunch and awards presentation. Four department employees were selected from a slate of 21 nominees to receive the 2008 Executive Director's Awards.

Nutrition Services Branch Administrative Services Director **Phil Waggoner** received the J. Ragan Neilson Award, given annually to an employee who has made an exemplary contribution to the department's administrative or financial services functions.



The fall weather gods smiled on department employees as they dug in to an Employee Appreciation celebration lunch held outside Building A on Oct. 29. The offerings included a variety of healthy salads served up with compostable tableware and paper goods.



Gov. Bill Ritter (right) tours the transformed Pepsi Center prior to the Democratic National Convention.

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Environmental Protection Specialist **Teresa Bennett** of Hazardous Materials and Waste Management garnered the Frank Johnson Award, which goes each year to an employee who has played an exemplary role in environmental improvement and protection in Colorado.

Epidemiologist **John Pape** with the Communicable Disease Epidemiology Program received the Jacille Zeches Award, which annually honors an employee who has made an exemplary contribution to public health activities in Colorado.

Stationary Sources Program Manager **Kirsten King**, of the Air Pollution Control Division, received the 2008 Employee of the Year Award, bestowed annually to an employee who has made an exemplary contribution to the department. The recipient of that award is chosen from among all the nominees for the other three awards.

Public Health Summit Sets Stage for Reorganization

“Change” emerged as the watchword in the waning days of 2008, as public health workers and government officials from across Colorado gathered Dec. 1-2 at the Colorado Public Health Summit in Golden. Their mission, to reorganize the state’s public health system to ensure all Coloradans have access to the same high-quality core public health services, sprung from Senate Bill 194, the Public Health Act of 2008, which took effect July 1.



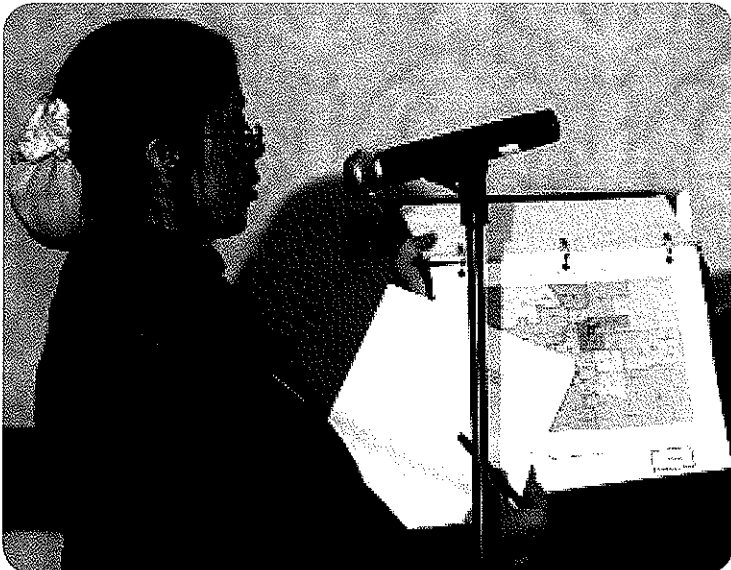
Alyson Shupe, chief of the Health Statistics Section, speaks at the Colorado Public Health Summit Dec. 1.

Reflecting on the mission of reorganizing the public health system during an economic downturn, Chief Medical Officer Ned Calonge told participants that limited state and federal resources will force officials to be strategic and evidence-based in setting health care priorities, rather than trying to cover all bases.

Over the summit’s two

days, participants met in work groups to review basic health services needed for all Coloradans, including providing clean air and water, planning for disasters, providing immunizations, preventing communicable diseases, tracking health status information, providing health education and more. Local and state officials floated ideas, voiced doubts and fears, and worked toward consensus about how to tackle the major deliverables of the new law.

“Given the downturn in the economy, it will be even more important for us to be successful,” Calonge told participants. “I think we’re going to improve the health of the people of Colorado, even with these challenges. This will be the most incredible public health journey Colorado’s ever had.” ■



At the Public Health Summit, Judy Grosswiler of Denver Public Health questions the ability of small counties with limited resources to meet the requirements of SB 194. Grosswiler compared the many resources available at her facility in Denver with those in Jackson County, where her sister, Jill Homecke, lives.