

Executive Summary

Better Together has completed its study of Public Health in the City of St. Louis and St. Louis County. This is the third of six studies that examine how municipal services are delivered to the people living within the boundaries of St. Louis City and County, compare the status quo to best practices, and identify opportunities for improvement and further conversation.

Study Chair, Will Ross, MD, Associate Dean for Diversity and Associate Professor of Medicine at Washington University School of Medicine, led a committee of over 20 professionals who work in the healthcare and public health field. Committee members included directors and staff of local nonprofit agencies, elected officials, doctors, researchers, and the directors of both the St. Louis City and County health departments. These individuals came together to contribute their knowledge of the public health landscape in the St. Louis region and help Better Together staff better understand the impacts of our current structure, as well as explore possibilities for its future. Their efforts have directly shaped the contents of this report and been instrumental in raising the profile of the ongoing discussions of how to best deliver public health services to the residents of St. Louis City and County.

As with previous Better Together studies, the data collected for this community-based study did not come solely from reports and statistics. While many are cited in our findings and available in our online database, dozens of meetings were held to understand the experiences of those who most rely on the services provided by the St. Louis City and County departments of health. These meetings included one-on-one coffees, gatherings with local health care and public health professionals, and sponsored discussions. The stories and insights gathered from these meetings provided critical data to the understanding of our public health departments and the future of what they can be.

The purpose of this report is not to compare the quality of public health service delivery in St. Louis City and County. Instead, Better Together staff and stakeholders sought to understand the similarities and differences between the function areas of the two departments of health and accurately portray possible impacts of the current structure, while exploring possibilities for future models. The report seeks to identify current practices and any potential benefits or challenges to a more regional approach to the delivery of public health services.

To that end, Better Together enlisted the services of well-regarded law firm, Bryan Cave, LLC, to assist in identifying any legal issues related to further collaboration between the St. Louis City and County departments of health. The subsequent legal memo examines the Missouri Constitution and revised statutes, the City of St. Louis charter and ordinances, and the St. Louis County charter and ordinances in order to gain a full understanding of the legal implications to the conversation. The memo also explores the legal ramifications of combining public health services in the scenarios in which St. Louis City remains separate from St. Louis County and in a scenario in which St. Louis City re-enters St. Louis County as a 91st incorporated municipality.

The study finds that there are many differences between the way the City and County departments of health operate. Some of these differences are related to difference in population size between the two – St. Louis City's population is 318,416 while St. Louis County's

population is 1,001,444 – but it is important to acknowledge all differences. For instance, staff sizes are greatly different – St. Louis has a staff of 142 while St. Louis County has staff of 519. Additionally, the City department of health has a budget of roughly \$25 million while the County operates on a budget of \$57 million. Another key difference in the two departments is the sources of their funding. St. Louis City receives approximately 51.5% of its budget from grants and contracts services while St. Louis County only receives 3.5% of its budget from similar sources. Instead, St. Louis County has a dedicated health property tax to fund many of its operations. The implications of this difference are explored in greater detail throughout the report.

A further key area of difference between the two departments is in how they provide healthcare care services to individuals who are uninsured or underinsured. The City health department contracts with the Regional Health Commission to provide urgent, specialty, and primary care services through the Gateway to Better Health Medicaid Waiver Program. The City has several smaller contracts with providers for immunization and STI services to provide for harder to reach populations. In contrast, the County health department operates three health centers that provide primary medical care to uninsured and underinsured residents.

Finally, the departments sometimes differ in the services they perform as a function of the broader structure of governments in which they are situated. For example, in St. Louis County, solid waste management is a function of the health department. Meanwhile, in the City of St. Louis, the streets department is responsible for delivering these services. Other examples of these kinds of distinctions are found throughout the study.

Ultimately, while the examination of the two health departments and discussions with key stakeholders found myriad differences, none seemed insurmountable in trying to seek improved services through a more regional approach to service delivery. This fact is further highlighted through an exploration of a recent merger of health departments in Summit County, Ohio. While challenges existed through the Summit County consolidation, the overall results are positive and hold promise for a strong future of increased efficiencies, expanded capacity, and improved delivery of public health services.

It is the intent of this study that the views expressed by healthcare and public health professionals will be central to any future plans to be developed and evaluated by the St. Louis community. Through this study, Better Together staff and stakeholders hope to highlight the many issues that would need to be addressed by any organization's plans for the future of the public health departments in the St. Louis region, as well as offer examples of successful efforts of other regions, to ensure the most beneficial outcome for its citizens.