The Response of Hinsdale County, Colorado to the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Case Study

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Introduction

• Urban public health solutions may be neither translatable nor effective rurally.
• It is important to study rural areas to understand strategies, challenges and solutions to public health challenges like COVID-19.
• This study investigates the responses of rural Hinsdale County, Colorado to COVID-19

Background

• Hinsdale County:
  • Location: Southwestern Colorado
  • Population: ~780 full-time residents
  • Size: 1,123 square miles
  • County Seat: Lake City
  • Considered to be one of the most remote and rural counties in the contiguous lower 48 states

• Why Hinsdale County?
  • Strong tourism culture and economy during the Summer months, population will often increase to over 3,000 individuals
  • Remote is an understatement regarding access, as the county seat is only accessible via Colorado Highway 149 which is a windy, one-lane highway along the upper Rio Grande
  • The nearest critical access hospital is in Gunnison, Colorado, which is over an hour drive and highly dependent on weather

• Why examine rural areas?
  • In the initial stages of the pandemic, 33% of rural counties were considered highly susceptible to COVID-19 due to various factors such as a lack of access to healthcare, increased disability rates, reduced social capital, and limited access to social services
  • Despite higher risks, rural areas were testing less frequent compared to urban areas
  • Prior to the pandemic, in 2019 18 rural hospitals closed across the United States, with a further 10 closing in the spring of 2020

Study Design:

• Single descriptive qualitative case study using thematic matrix analysis
• Stakeholder interviews: standardized questions, recorded and transcribed
• Timeframe: January 1, 2020 to July 31, 2020
• Topics: initial awareness of COVID-19, difficulties with first wave, and strategies for the upcoming fall
• IRB: approved as not human subjects
• Participants:
  - Lake City Area Medical Center Director
  - Hinsdale County Emergency Medical Services Director
  - Silver-Thread Public Health District Director
  - Hinsdale County Office of Emergency Management Director
  - Chair of the Lake City Board of Health
  - Hinsdale County Public Information Officer/Administrator
  - Hinsdale County School District Superintendent/Principal

Results

Key Results:

• Partnerships are of utmost importance
  • Community Organizations Communicate and Collaborate
  • Learn from Nearby Counties
  • Active Pre-Existing Plans

• Resources are scarce
  • Small Workforce
  • Limited Financial Resources
  • Diminished Supplies

• Impact on the town is of major concern
  • Tourism Risk
  • Economic Impact

• Reliable, authoritative information is lacking

Other Results:

The following themes were identified during interviews, but were less frequent during interviews:

• Increased scope of practice
• Political undertones surrounding the pandemic
• Concerns about psychological stress
• Difficulty with public adherence to public health guidelines

Conclusions

• Rural communities must create a network of public health, medical, and civilian agencies in preparation for public health emergencies
• Rural areas face limited staffing and must adapt public health guidelines to their local resources, economics and politics.
• In preparation for further pandemics or public health crises, special care needs to be dedicated to the needs and real conditions of rural communities.

References

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