State Health Policies and Programs

Purpose

State health policies and programs address the need to protect life through overseeing the public health. Initially, the states focused on epidemics and local health nuisances. Later, the states’ role evolved into disease prevention and health education, with an increasing emphasis today on chronic diseases such as heart disease and cancer.

Since the U.S. Constitution does not mention health, the responsibility has fallen to the states. However, the federal government has increasingly become involved in the health field and large federal grants-in-aid have been issued to states to provide health services.

Programs

The most common programs and functions are:

- Communicable disease control
- Environmental health monitoring
- Industrial hygiene programs
- Laboratory services
- Licensing of medical professionals
- Local health department supervision
- Mother and child health care
- Public hospitals (general, mental, and for the disabled)
- Sanitation inspection (water supplies, milk, restaurants, etc.)
- Vital statistics program

Management and Finances

The chief executive officer of the Department of Health is usually required to be a physician and is usually appointed by the governor.

State governments are spending approximately $34 billion annually on health services.

Highlights in the Development of State Health Programs

- 1751 — First public hospital, called Pennsylvania Hospital, is opened in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin and physician Thomas Bond.
- 1869 — Massachusetts Board of Health is the first to be active on an ongoing basis.
- ca 1960s — State mental health hospitals begin to discharge patients into community care facilities.
- 1963 — Federal legislation authorizes funds for construction of community mental health facilities.
- 1965 — States are mandated to administer new national Medicaid program to assist the needy with health care.