Building Trust in Water
Virginia Pilot Program

Mission

Virginia Health Catalyst's Water Equity Taskforce is a statewide, intersectional group of water stakeholders whose mission is to ensure all Virginians have equitable access to quality tap water that is trusted, affordable, and fluoridated; and that tap water is the beverage of choice for all Virginians. The Water Communication Workgroup (a subset of the Water Equity Taskforce) developed a pilot program to help water utility staff identify better ways to communicate about water with community members in order to improve public perception and trust in tap water.

Pilot Program Outline

Partner with at least three water utilities in Virginia to:
- Understand their current water communication methods and identify opportunities to improve; examples include public notices and/or Consumer Confidence Report template
- Assist utilities with developing and testing improved communication methods
- Provide technical assistance and guidance
- Engage community members served by the utility to provide input

Background

Water utilities work hard to ensure that they provide high-quality water to their consumers, and they employ different methods to communicate this. One method is distributing a required annual water quality report, the Consumer Confidence Report (CCR), to their customers. Experts observe that "CCRs are intended to improve public health protection by providing educational material to allow consumers to make educated decisions regarding any potential health risk pertaining to the quality, treatment, and management of their drinking water supply. Although all water utilities write and distribute CCRs, many acknowledge they need to improve their CCRs as tools to communicate with their customers."[1] This highlights an opportunity to examine all methods of public-facing water communication, including the CCR, and test improvements to increase trust of tap waters in communities.

Potential Opportunities

- Improve/develop water quality communications
  - Create accessible, understandable materials that highlight water quality and safety
  - Make the data relatable to community members who are not water experts
  - Provide information not only on regulated contaminants, but also additional information relevant to the consumer; ex. secondary contaminants or additional water information
- Improve CCR template/language
  - Use infographics to communicate data findings
  - Use clear, active voice language at an eighth-grade reading level
  - Diversify methods of sharing information to improve equitable distribution of information
- Promote drinking tap water for public health
  - Celebrate water; make it known that water improves health
  - Include education about community water fluoridation health benefits where applicable

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[1] Phetxumphou, K., Roy, S., Davy, B. M., Estabrooks, P., You, W., & Dietrich, A. M. (2017). Write Consumer Confidence Reports Customers Can Understand. *Opflow, 43*(2), 24–26. https://doi.org/10.5991/opf.2017.43.0010

Format

The Building Trust in Water Pilot Program will build relationships with Virginia water utilities to identify areas of opportunity to test new or improved water communication methods and materials. This program will include participation from both water utility staff and community members to provide input on areas of improvement and feedback on proposed changes. The program start with an introductory webinar that showcases the possibilities for improved water communication and more effective CCRs. Following the webinar, utilities can apply to the pilot program. This pilot program is designed to be flexible, and will adapt to meet the needs of program participants. This timeline is estimated and flexible.

Stage 1: Introduction and Application   **May**
- Program kick-off w/ intro webinar
- Utilities apply to participate in the pilot program
- A review board reviews the applications and selects utilities to participate in the program

Stage 2: Water Communication Development   **June – October**
- Establish relationships with water utility staff
- Document and understand the utilities' current water communication efforts
- Identify opportunities to improve water quality communication
- Connect utilities with water communication and CCR development experts
- Develop and test new communication methods

Stage 3: Empower Community Members   **June-October**
- Build a network of community liaisons statewide to consult as ambassadors for the pilot program
- Learn their desired outcomes and develop objectives for water utility communication
- Evaluate their perceptions of the current communication methods (i.e. do they know who their water utility is, do they know what a CCR is, do they trust their tap water, etc.)
- Test communication changes with community members and solicit feedback
- Revise communication method/template based on community member feedback
- Survey community members to understand the effects of improved water communication methods
- Quantify changes in understanding, confidence, readability, perceived safety of the water, etc.

Stage 4: Next Steps   **October-December**
- Summarize programs findings and lessons learned (including replicable program design and Virginia-specific data collection)
- Determine next steps: replicate pilot program with additional utilities, Phase 2 of pilot program, etc.

Pilot Program Partner Organizations

Virginia Health Catalyst (Catalyst)
Virginia Department of Health Office of Drinking Water (ODW)
Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth (VFHY)
Environmental Policy Innovation Center (EPIC)
Water Communication Workgroup (facilitated by Catalyst)