

Strengthening Public Health at Its Core: A Focus on Disease Intervention Specialists

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Disease Intervention Specialists (DIS) work in communities throughout the United States and the U.S. Territories to protect the public's health. Originally established to work in the field of STD prevention, DIS have ground-level investigative skills that have become key components of tuberculosis outbreak response, HIV exposure notification, other infectious disease control efforts, and emergency response. DIS develop expertise in essential skills such as communication, interviewing, counseling, case analysis, and provider and community engagement. Today, as the healthcare landscape evolves, DIS are needed even more as patient navigators and network builders to ensure linkage to care through expanded relationships with healthcare providers.

To support this critical public health workforce, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is developing a national certification program for DIS to expand the recognition of DIS, increase practice efficacy and efficiency, establish national competencies, and ensure adequate support and training. In 2013, as a first step toward developing the certification program, CDC's Division of STD Prevention partnered with the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) to conduct a feasibility assessment and develop a draft business plan for implementing a DIS certification program. NACCHO contracted with Internal Credentialing Associates to complete this work. The results indicated overwhelming support for certification from practicing DIS, their supervisors, and state and local public health leadership. The feasibility assessment produced recommendations for pursuit of the development of a DIS certification program.

CDC is working with NACCHO, the National Coalition of STD Directors, and the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) to further explore DIS certification and implement recommendations from the feasibility assessment. Further, PHAB will overlay this work with the health department accreditation standards and measures to bolster the infrastructure in which DIS work and ensure sustainability over time. The funded partners and CDC will collaborate with a broader group of stakeholders, including DIS, state and local health officials, national membership organizations, certification experts, and interested parties throughout CDC to ensure support for and the development of a quality program.

This work is intended to improve public health prevention outcomes and state and local health departments' readiness and capacity to address STDs, as well as other outbreaks and emergencies of all kinds. Praise from CDC leaders, external national partners, health officials, HIV and STD directors, DIS, training entities, and others for the DIS certification effort validates the need for this critical public health infrastructure. 