



KEY POINTS

for Successful Foodborne Outbreak Detection and Investigation

CREATING A TEAM OF STUDENT WORKERS FOR FOODBORNE DISEASE SURVEILLANCE AND OUTBREAK RESPONSE

Creating a team of student workers can enhance the efficiency of foodborne disease surveillance and outbreak investigations by freeing up time and energy for epidemiologists to analyze data and coordinate activities with other public health partners. Here are some key points to make this work, based on MDH's 20 years of experience with "Team Diarrhea."

1. Recruit MPH or undergraduate Public Health students

- The more closely related to public health their academic track is, the more invested and motivated the student workers will be.
- 1st year MPH students are ideal - they can stay for 2 years and you will thus better be able to recoup your training investment.
- Ideally the team always consists of a mix of more experienced and newer students (so the entire team doesn't turn over all at once).

2. Make the students actual employees of your health department (i.e., pay them!)

- Students are more committed to the work, stay at the job longer, and are more accountable if they are paid health department employees.
- Create a set work schedule for student workers (usually month by month). Schedule about half of the work hours during evenings and weekends (we find that late Sunday afternoon/evening is the best time to reach people on weekends); this improves the ability to reach cases.

3. Create an academic work environment and provide academic incentives

- Incorporate learning about epidemiology and public health into the work experience.
- Provide field experience credits and master's projects (topics, data, and supervision).
- Create a team environment - students should share job duties and work on projects/outbreaks together.
- Encourage students to attend meetings and conference calls that demonstrate the context and impact of their day-to-day work.
- Encourage team discussions with epidemiologists - these discussions often become ad-hoc seminars that provide unique learning opportunities.

4. Train students appropriately

- Students should be trained on basic disease information, policies, and procedures.
- Students should be trained on general interviewing skills and also the particulars of each questionnaire that they will use.
- Epidemiologists should stress the importance of capturing details during interviews.
- New students should observe epidemiologists or more experienced students conduct interviews.
- Epidemiologists should listen to interviews being conducted by new students until they are comfortable with the student's proficiency.
- On the job experience is the most effective training tool. Students who participate in a successful investigation are more motivated to help solve others.

5. Supervise students closely

- Epidemiologists should continuously review interviews and give feedback to students as necessary.
- Students should be encouraged to think about exposures elicited in interviews of cases in the same cluster, to discuss them with other students, and to alert epidemiologists of potentially important observations. However, the epidemiologists still need to lead cluster investigations, including the evaluation of exposures and making decisions about further actions (e.g., re-interviewing, collection of food samples).

