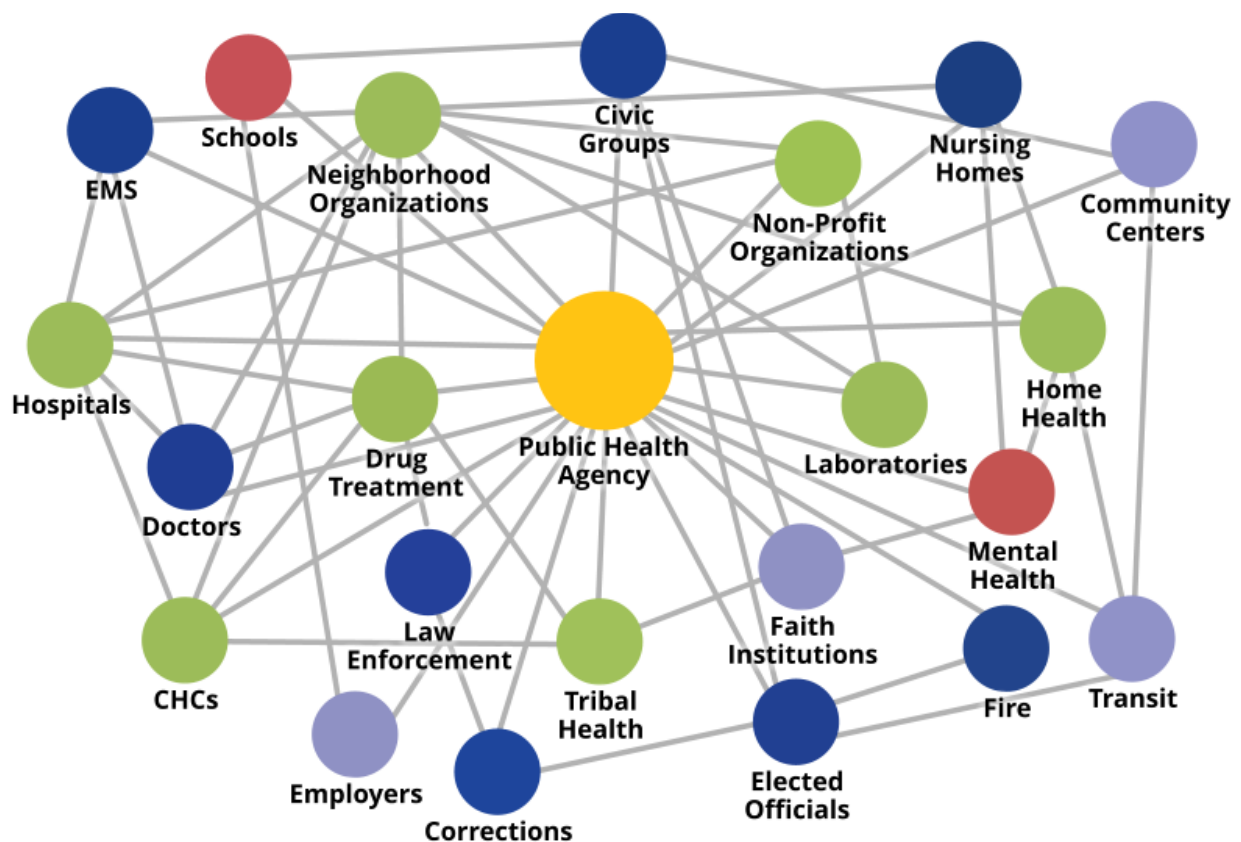# Linking with Public Health

What is the Public Health System?

The public health system is a large, interconnected network of public and private organizations and coalitions.
The public health system includes:

CDC. https://www.cdc.gov/publichealthgateway/publichealthservices/essentialhealthservices.html

What is governmental public health?
Governmental public health promotes the well-being of the entire population; protecting that population from the spread of infectious disease and environmental hazards, promoting policies that support health, providing health and disease information, and working to provide access to safe and quality care to benefit the population as a whole.

The governmental part of public health includes 3 levels: federal, state, and local public health agencies.

Federal

- US Department of Health & Human Services
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC)
- US Public Health Service

State of Wisconsin

- WI Department of Health Services
  - WI Division of Public Health

Local Public Health
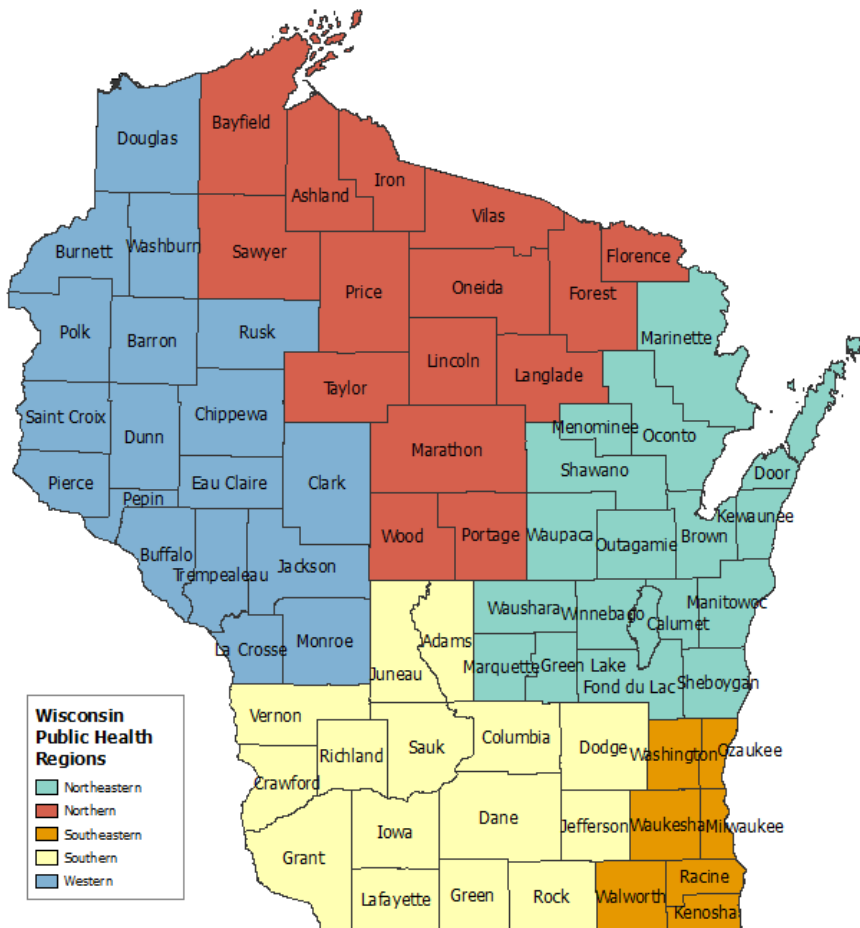
- County & City Health Departments

Figure 1. Source: https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/lh-depts/counties.htm

The map above (Figure 1) shows the public health regions in Wisconsin.

The most common local public health departments are formed at the County level, however in some counties there are additional municipal health departments. For example, Milwaukee County is comprised completely of municipal health departments. Wisconsin's 72 counties have 12 tribal and 86 local public health departments. These municipal and county boundaries determine the "jurisdiction" of the health department's authority and service delivery.

Community Health Workers are an important part of the public health system and may encounter many situations where communication with local public health agencies is mutually beneficial. Your local health department generally has a website with a phone number for general inquiries. You may find it helpful to introduce yourself as a Community Health Worker and indicate what organization you represent. If you know a member of your local health department staff through your community network or coalition work, you may find it helpful to contact that person directly and they should be able to refer you to the appropriate person in the agency to address your inquiry. Working in partnership with the community to improve health is an essential service of local public health agencies.

How does Communicable Disease Control & Prevention work in Wisconsin?

At the federal level, Communicable Disease guidelines generally come through the CDC.
Each state has a state health department; in Wisconsin, this is the [Department of Health Services, Division of Public Health](#). The state legislature writes public health legislation through state statutes, and the Department of Health Services writes Administrative Rules.
In Wisconsin, we have communicable disease statutes and administrative rules that govern how state and local public health officials respond to communicable disease outbreaks.
State and Local public health officials use state statutes and administrative rules in addition to local ordinances to support their responses to public health emergencies, such as in the case of COVID-19.

Within Wisconsin, there are a few important things to keep in mind regarding how public health works across the state and across different levels.
**Wisconsin has a decentralized public health structure (sometimes this is also referred to as a "home rule state" model). This means that Local and Tribal health departments have ultimate authority and primary responsibility for contact tracing of their own residents.
  • State & Local health departments have statutory authority to require reporting as well as prevention & control measures
    • Examples of prevention & control measures used during the COVID-19 pandemic: Closing schools and some businesses, restricting gathering sizes, mask mandates, contact tracing, isolation, quarantine, and vaccination
  • The state health department issues guidance and protocols related to COVID-19 testing, treatment, and control. The state health department administers the federal funding related to the COVID-19 response and provides funding to local health departments and hospitals
  • Local/Tribal Health Departments (LTHDs) have primary responsibility for contact tracing, however during the pandemic, the number of cases exceeded the capacity of many local health departments, and the state was able to centralize some of the contact tracing.

Governmental Public Health agencies have a responsibility to provide up-to-date, science-based health information to the public. Most agencies use their websites and social media to disseminate information. These governmental public health websites are a trusted source for the most current information on communicable disease guidelines, safety precautions, and information about how to protect your health.

The figure below (Figure 2) describes the process for COVID-19 disease investigation and tracking in Wisconsin at the start of the pandemic, including the information pathways connecting healthcare providers, state and local public health agencies, and the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. Individuals who were experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 were able to access testing guidance and appointments by either calling their health care provider or completing an online screening tool developed by the State of Wisconsin. If symptoms of COVID-19 were present, individuals could be tested at their health care facility or at several community sites. Once processed, all laboratory results were electronically uploaded onto the

state's Electronic Disease Surveillance system. Disease investigators at the state and local health departments reviewed positive COVID-19 test results and initiated the process of calling individuals who tested positive as well as their close contacts. These calls included providing education and guidance to help individuals monitor their own health and prevent spreading the virus to others.

Figure 2

COVID-19 Testing & Contact Tracing