INTRODUCTION

Putting Law to Work to Improve Public Health: A National Convening

Donna E. Levin

In October 2014, the Network for Public Health Law and the American Society of Law, Medicine & Ethics (ASLME), with the generous support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, co-sponsored the National Public Health Law Conference: Intersection of Law, Policy and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia. This supplement issue of the Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics is dedicated to some of the critical topics examined at this conference.

Law governs how public health strategies are authorized and implemented, yet not all of us working to improve the public’s health understand what a powerful tool the law can be and how to put it to work. The 2014 conference was an opportunity for the 550 lawyers, practitioners, advocates, policymakers, researchers, and students involved at the federal, state, tribal and local level to connect, learn, and be inspired to use law to protect the public’s health and to build a culture of health.

The goals of the conference align with those of the Network for Public Health Law to:

• connect those working in public health with each other and build partnerships to accomplish public health objectives and foster innovation;
• examine practical legal approaches to address public health issues;
• promote increased knowledge and use of law in public health policy and prevention;
• build the field of public health law; and
• build a culture of health by bringing the public health law perspective to those sectors that impact health such as education and transportation.

These objectives are evident in the pre-conference workshops and 40 concurrent sessions, which were organized into the following five tracks: (1) prevention and the role of law; (2) legal interventions to promote public health; (3) data management and public health implications; (4) emerging issues in public health law; and (5) public health legal preparedness and response. In addition, the student pre-conference workshop and the popular “speed-mentoring” session, focused on building the field for the next generation.

In what has come to be a conference tradition and favorite, Gene Matthews, Director, Network for Public Health Law – Southeastern Region, Wendy Parmet, Professor, Northeastern University School of Law, and Scott Burris, Director, Public Health Law Research, presented a plenary session, “Public Health Law: Looking Back and Ahead,” which explored some of the major themes that have emerged in public health law since the last Public Health Law Conference convened in 2012 including, marijuana laws, the opioid epidemic, the implementation and challenges to the Affordable Care Act, the Hobby Lobby decision, Ebola, and the growth in, and challenges and directions for, the field of public health law. Other highlights of the conference included a keynote by FDA Center for Tobacco Products (CTP) Director Mitch
**Zeller**, who shared his experience and insights on the history of FDA tobacco regulation, and how the historical intersection of food and drug law with policy has impacted current and future actions of CTP. In addition, PBS NewsHour Health Policy Analyst **Susan Dentzer**, was joined by **Audrey Tayse Haynes**, Kentucky Cabinet Secretary for Health and Family Services, for a “fireside chat” to discuss her experience and perspectives on health insurance, Medicaid expansion, public health funding and initiatives, data sharing, and public health systems.

Workshop and concurrent session presenters provided valuable, practical knowledge, strategies, and options for the use of law to address a spectrum of public health challenges. This supplement issue includes manuscripts addressing all five conference tracks and covering many of the topics covered in these sessions.

Law governs how public health strategies are authorized and implemented, yet not all of us working to improve the public’s health understand what a powerful tool the law can be and how to put it to work. The 2014 conference was an opportunity for the 550 lawyers, practitioners, advocates, policymakers, researchers, and students involved at the federal, state, tribal and local level to connect, learn, and be inspired to use law to protect the public’s health and to build a culture of health.
I want to take the opportunity to extend my special thanks to our conference co-sponsors, ASLME: Katie Johnson, ASLME Conference Director, Ted Hutchinson, ASLME Executive Director, Courtney McClellan, ASLME Managing Editor of this issue, and their staff who worked tirelessly on planning and logistics. In addition, I would like to express my appreciation for all my colleagues at the Network National Coordinating Center and Regions for their assistance with the conference and in reviewing and editing manuscripts for this issue. Finally, a special thanks goes to Brooke Nunn, Network Program Coordinator, for her valued competence and support in the preparation of this supplement issue.