

APPLETREE COVID-19 Supplemental Awards

Indiana Department of Health

Introduction

In early 2021, ASTHO, with support from CDC's National Center for Environmental Health and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), announced awards to five state health agencies to support their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. State health agencies in Kentucky, Virginia, Arkansas, Vermont, and Indiana were selected for this opportunity because of their recent application to ATSDR's Partnership to Promote Local Efforts to Reduce Environmental Exposure (APPLETREE) cooperative agreement program. Vermont requested that ASTHO work directly with their partner organization, [Informed Green Solutions \(IGS\)](#), for this project. ASTHO provided funding and assistance to the recipient state health agencies and state health agency partners to support their environmental health-related COVID-19 response activities. This factsheet outlines planned activities and their associated outcomes under these awards for the Indiana Department of Health (IDOH).

Planned Activities

IDOH's Environmental Public Health Division planned to conduct a variety of proposed activities as part of this funding award, including providing technical assistance to local health departments on both COVID-19 mitigation measures in various settings and the safe reopening of buildings after prolonged shutdowns. Activities planned as part of this award included:

- Developing site assessment checklists for a variety of facilities, including manufacturing facilities, food processing plants, overnight youth camps, and schools.
- Conducting COVID-19 precaution-based site assessments of various facilities, including manufacturing facilities, food processing plants, overnight youth camps, and schools.
- Assisting local health departments with implementing and optimizing COVID-19 mitigation measures in schools, overnight youth camps, and/or other workplace facilities.
- Developing guidance and training documents on safe water system practices after periods of prolonged building vacancy.
- Conducting outreach to local health departments, building operators, and schools on safe premise plumbing startup practices.

Project Outcomes

IDOH focused most of its efforts on ensuring schools had the information necessary to safely restart their water systems after extended closures, and overnight youth camps were able to operate safely during summer 2021. Schools were an important focus because, even in years not impacted by the pandemic, they close for prolonged periods of time. IDOH therefore believed it would be helpful to develop guidance that could be useful beyond the pandemic. Furthermore, overnight youth camps needed to be able to operate safely during the COVID-19 pandemic, and IDOH saw this project as an opportunity to provide them with the resources and technical assistance to do so.

IDOH developed and sent schools and local health departments a three-page pamphlet overviewing information on restarting water systems safely after prolonged closures. IDOH also developed more detailed guidance for schools around restarting water systems safely, created an outreach video to complement this guidance, and held a webinar for school staff with information on safe building water

start-up. Moving forward, IDOH will continue to provide technical assistance to schools and local health departments to help them ensure their building water systems are operating safely.

For the overnight youth camps, IDOH conducted multiple COVID-19 precaution-based site assessments to review COVID-19 congregate setting guidance and ensure camps were following the guidance before reopening. To assist them in safely reopening, IDOH led webinars on workplace safety, provided guidance on COVID-19 protocols to the camps and local health departments, and reviewed emergency plans to provide guidance on safe camp activities. Where possible, IDOH staff provided a review of both engineering and administrative controls that camp operators should enact to prevent ill campers from coming onsite, eliminate contacts with campers that become sick, and control the exposure to camp staff week after week. Site assessment checklists were provided to operators to assist with the safe reopening of overnight youth camps.

Project Challenges and Barriers

During this project, IDOH encountered several challenges and barriers:

- Finding staff to support this project, especially for the premise plumbing work, proved challenging. To address this issue, IDOH worked with inspectors to identify staff to support this work. The funding also allowed IDOH to bring in a part-time employee to support this project. For the overnight youth camp work, other competing IDOH priorities, such as agricultural labor and RV camp safety, were challenging to juggle at the same time.
- Reaching out to schools regarding the risks of building water start-up after prolonged shutdowns was an anticipated barrier in this project. IDOH has a system through the Indiana Department of Education to disseminate important information to principals and school nurses, which they utilized for guidance distribution. IDOH also plans to get the word out through its Indoor Air Quality program, which regularly inspects schools.
- Ensuring IDOH staff working with the overnight youth camps understood the COVID-19 precaution-based site assessment metrics was key. IDOH created site assessment checklists and held regular meetings to ensure everyone was aware of the expectations.
- State Emergency Orders can change quickly and keeping up with changing guidelines and rules can prove challenging, as many jurisdictions likely found, throughout the pandemic.

Reflections and Final Thoughts

Some final thoughts and lessons learned throughout the project included the following:

- Tools, resources, and guidance for COVID-19 site assessments and the safe operation of building water systems after prolonged closures can be useful in the future, either in their current form or modified to meet the need of the moment.
- Beginning outreach to overnight youth camps early and reminding them that working with IDOH is about ensuring safety for both staff and campers was crucial. Once IDOH connected with camps, they were able to work to address any questions and concerns quickly due to the initial outreach and follow up communications.
- Providing model policies, especially for safe overnight youth camp operations, proved helpful for operators. Not everyone is a full-time operator, so guidance is always appreciated.

Resources Developed

The resource below was developed, updated, and/or supported fully or partially as a part of this project:

- [IDOH Water System Startup Guide for Schools](#)