

## Lowndes County Community Meeting News Article Excerpts and Talking Points

Main goals are to:

- 1) Ostensibly align our interests with those of the community and partners (improving public health);
- 2) Reframe the conversation away from hookworm and toward identifying potential health effects of sewage exposure; and
- 3) Present ADPH as one partner among many working diligently toward effective and sustainable solutions.

Theme	Excerpt from recent news article	Proposed Talking Point
ADPH or LHD isn't doing enough, or appears to be disengaged from constructive efforts	<p><i>In May, the Alabama Department of Public Health announced it would team up with local officials in Lowndes County to run a survey about sewage infrastructure and public health. But Rush and several other local residents said they've never heard from local officials about addressing the issue.</i></p> <p><i>Cantrell McAlpine, a Lowndes County public service commissioner who has lived in a rural part of the county since 1982, said that the local health department doesn't remain in contact with residents, which has led to a lack of supervision over how septic systems are installed or maintained.</i></p> <p><i>"It's something that could be rectified, but we need a good active health department with proper follow-ups to help people understand what you have to do," McAlpine said.</i></p>	<p>The Lowndes County Community Assessment was performed using CDC-approved methods to obtain a better snapshot of the knowledge and attitudes of the whole community, this includes randomizing which houses were surveyed, similar to how the Census works. The information from the Community Assessment can be found on ADPH's website by clicking on Diseases and Outbreaks then Infectious Diseases and Outbreaks.</p> <p>ADPH is committed to working with partners across the government, institutions of higher learning, and communities across Lowndes County to improve sanitation and prevent diseases related to inadequate sanitation.</p>
ADPH (or the government) is painted as a callous regulatory entity	<p><i>An Alabama Department of Public Health spokesperson said that the agency and local health departments work with residents to bring septic systems into compliance... Black Belt residents are often mistrustful of government intervention and fearful of rumored consequences, like being arrested if they come forward with mismanaged home waste systems.</i></p> <p><i>Health officials are also working to counteract rampant rumors that the department locks up residents who resort to straight piping. Though residents can be cited and fined, Harris said it's a last resort that usually happens a year or more after the Alabama health department tries to work with the resident. According to Lowndes County Circuit Clerk records, seven people have pleaded guilty to similar citations since 1996.</i></p>	<p>Our main concern right now is addressing the health needs of Lowndes County residents, and working toward effective and sustainable solutions to inadequate sanitation in the region.</p> <p>Citations for straight pipes are extraordinarily rare, especially since it is clear that there are significant (financial) barriers to residents obtaining adequate onsite wastewater management. Under these circumstances, citations do not benefit the community, and they do not improve public health.</p>

<p>There are hookworms or Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) in Lowndes County</p>	<p><i>In Mejia's 2017 study in Lowndes County, Alabama, the disease was found in one third of 55 people tested. Researchers suspect many other communities across the region have similarly high numbers. Now, doctors, researchers, community activists, and lawmakers are working on programs and solutions to reduce the number of neglected tropical diseases in the U.S. South, including a hookworm vaccine, more active community surveillance efforts, and better sanitation infrastructure.</i></p>	<p>ADPH is committed to working with partners to identify potential health effects related to sewage exposure in Lowndes County and to create solutions toward solving them.</p> <p>Further assessment of the burden of hookworm disease among residents is necessary and ongoing.</p> <p>However, public health experts agree that findings from the McKenna Hookworm study are inconclusive and at this time there is not enough evidence to suggest hookworms are a major health problem in Lowndes.</p>
--	--	---

TALKING POINTS RELATED TO THE HOOKWORM STUDY

- 1) The McKenna study published last year brings important and much needed attention to inadequate sanitation infrastructure in Lowndes County, in part by focusing on “neglected tropical diseases”, such as hookworm infections among residents.
- 2) Public health experts agree the findings from the McKenna Hookworm study are inconclusive for several reasons.
  - a. The results which are often cited in news articles did not actually meet what is called statistical significance, or the bare minimum threshold to suggest that they are truthful scientific observations. We care about this because it helps to inform effective public health decision making. If a study result does not meet this threshold, we generally do not accept it as truth.
  - b. 11 stool samples collected during this study (from the 19 persons identified as positive by Baylor) were sent to a CDC Lab for standard parasitic testing, including examination for eggs and parasites. Only 9 specimens were acceptable for testing, yet none of them came back positive for hookworm. This is important because the gold standard to establish a diagnosis of hookworm involves identifying hookworm eggs visible in the stool.
  - c. The diagnostic test used by Baylor was not FDA-approved and should not be used to establish diagnosis or direct treatment for hookworm because it does not meet our minimum standards to reliably detect hookworms in humans. The test has not yet been validated for this purpose, and therefore results from this test should be interpreted with caution.
  - d. The houses which were chosen were a convenience sample rather than a randomized sample of houses. A randomized selection of houses better enables the researchers to show disease burden more closely representative of the community.
- 3) Although there is not enough scientific evidence at this time to conclude that hookworm is widespread in Lowndes County, this question can and should be explored further using widely-accepted principles of population health studies.
- 4) This is why CDC has funded a more comprehensive assessment of hookworms in the Black Belt Region using more rigorous scientific methods. The study, “Soil Transmitted Helminths Study.” is being conducted by the University of Alabama at Birmingham. The study will be conducted in four clinical sites within Wilcox County, Alabama with a goal of enrolling approximately 600 children for the purpose of testing.
- 5) One benefit of the McKenna Hookworm study is that it has brought a lot of needed attention to inadequate sanitation in this region, and it has highlighted how little we know about community health effects due to this problem. ADPH is working diligently to answer this question.

<p>6) However, parasitic infections such as hookworms, are only one small component of a wide spectrum of diseases which can result from sewage exposure. The other major categories of sewage-related diseases are viral and bacterial diseases.</p> <p>7) ADPH is actively searching through public medical records to determine if some of these diseases are more common in places like Lowndes and Wilcox counties compared to other counties which have more well-established sanitation infrastructure in place.</p>		
<p>Reliance on outside philanthropic or academic institutions for solutions</p>	<p><i>With the local leadership of Catherine Flowers, who founded the Alabama Center for Rural Enterprise and works for the nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative, partnerships have formed between Duke University, Baylor College of Medicine, community groups and engineering experts to tackle technical and policy solutions to Alabama’s public health crisis and others like it across the South.</i></p>	<p>We applaud the efforts of activists, academic institutions, and engineering experts who are committed to better understanding and improving sanitation in the Black Belt Region, and we look forward to working together toward creating and maintaining viable solutions to this complicated problem using a multidisciplinary and multifaceted approach.</p>
<p>The shame and indignity of having sewage in or on your community/property</p>	<p><i>“A long time ago, I was ashamed about it, and didn’t want anybody looking at this stuff,” Rush said, peeking through a frayed curtain over a cracked window to see her son. “But I had to come out of my shame. God gives me strength. I hope it will happen in my lifetime. It might.”</i></p>	<p>No one should have to endure the shame of raw sewage collecting in or around the home. All of us, including our neighbors and our children have a right to live happy and healthy lives free from concern about disease which may come from sewage exposure. ADPH is committed to working with other government, academic, and community partners toward understanding these issues better and toward improving sanitation infrastructure in Alabama communities.</p>
<p>Other mentions of ADPH in news articles</p>	<p><i>“We’re involved because it’s important to us that people have adequate sewage,” said Scott Harris, the Alabama Department of Public Health’s state health officer. “At the same time, we’re not the Alabama agency that builds sewer systems. We’re not funded for that. But we’re invested in seeing that happen for people, and we’re trying to facilitate it the best we can.”</i></p> <p><i>Earlier this year, the Alabama public health department, with the help of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, surveyed 192 households. They found a majority indicated sewage and sanitation were problems in Lowndes County, with 31 percent reporting “sewage backing up into the home, off-color or foul-smelling water from faucet, and standing sewage or run-off near the home” occurring in the past year.</i></p> <p><i>Sherry Bradley, a longtime state health department employee and Black Belt native, is developing public information campaigns to educate residents on proper septic maintenance as well as encourage individual reporting of onsite sewage failure. Tasked with regulating everything from restaurants to tattoo parlors to septic tanks, the department says its budget limits how proactive it can be without citizens alerting them to ongoing problems.</i></p> <p><i>The agency is buying billboard space, attending church functions, and organizing town halls like one held in late May with Congresswoman Terri A. Sewell (D-AL) and Senator Doug Jones (D-AL), where Jones apologized for the neglect Lowndes County has experienced.</i></p>	