



PUBLIC HEALTH NEWSLETTER

BASTROP COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT

**SITTING
AT**



**THE KIDS'
TABLE**

By: Donna Nichols, Executive Director, BCPHD

Call me old-fashioned, old-school, or just plain old. Or maybe just someone who appreciates the simple, unadorned peaceful life. It's that time of year when we all tend to reminisce about days gone by.

I remember sitting at the kids' table during holiday celebrations—surrounded by cousins and neighborhood kids, wondering when I'd finally graduate to the adults' table. The kids' table was a chaotic mix of flying food, giggles, and the occasional full-blown food fight the moment the grown-ups left the room. I longed for the day I could join the adults, where the conversation was calm and the food stayed on your plate. Oh, what memories...

A New Kind of Kids' Table

Today, "sitting at the kids' table" means something entirely different. This year, the Bastrop County Public Health Department turned two.

In human years, we're still toddlers—but in organizational years, we're growing up fast. With the support of our Advisory Board of Health, Local Health Authority, county partners, and elected officials, we've been building our own table—our infrastructure—to serve the residents of Bastrop County.

We've come a long way from our bare-bones beginnings. In just two years, we've:

- Recommended solutions for affordable housing
- Expanded the local healthcare workforce
- Launched infectious disease surveillance
- Planned the transition of clinical services
- Built robust health information systems
- Engaged the community through social media and newsletters

We may still be "at the kids' table," but we're not just sitting—we're standing up, speaking out, and spreading our wings.

SITTING AT THE KIDS' TABLE (CONT.)

Looking Ahead

The future of Bastrop County's health won't be left to chance. We're not waiting to see what happens, we're leading with purpose. We're building a resilient, healthy county from the ground up. We're not just reacting to threats—we're preventing them, preparing for the unexpected, and protecting every resident.

This is more than a strategy. It's a promise.

A promise to build a healthier, more connected Bastrop County—one concrete action at a time.

Happy Holidays, Bastrop County.

To learn more about our second year as a health department, you can view our annual report [here](#).

See you in the New Year!



HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

*By: Amy Mills, Grants Coordinator,
BCPHD*

Ho-Ho-Home Sweet Home

At this time of year, the concept of "home" takes on special meaning for so many of us. That means it's the perfect time to highlight the work of the Bastrop County Collaborative for Housing + Health (BCCHH). This dedicated group has been working all year to engage local residents in designing solutions and policies to encourage the development of more safe, affordable, and attainable housing, as a pathway to a healthier county for all of us.

BCCHH spent the summer engaging the community to learn more about their housing needs and the role housing plays in their overall well-being and health. What we heard was an overwhelming community sentiment

that more affordable and attainable housing is a real need for our neighbors at every stage of life in Bastrop County. Here are some quotes from Bastrop County residents from some listening sessions this summer, which are representative of the kind of feedback we heard consistently:

"A place that's decent and affordable shouldn't be too much to ask—but for a single mom, it feels impossible."

"I want housing that lets me stay independent—but without the stress. A small place I can take care of, with some shared space and people to connect with. That would change everything."

"Housing doesn't work for a lot of our young people who are starting out, like teachers... they cannot own homes, and they cannot find anything to rent."

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS (CONT.)

“You shouldn’t have to be a millionaire to live somewhere decent. I support housing that matches wages—not handouts, but options that make it possible to thrive.”

What Comes Next

The BCCHH wants all our neighbors to have safe, affordable housing here in the county we all love. So, we’re working to turn that community insight and feedback into a design for a sample Master Plan to show what might become possible when we design a neighborhood of affordable and attainable housing based on exactly what our residents say they want and need.

This team is also working to develop a Policy Recommendations Report, which is based on a year of research into local-level policies and actions that can support and encourage more affordable and attainable housing, as well as those that can have the unintended consequences of hindering affordable housing development.

We’re so excited to see what this incredible team will achieve in the new year as we work towards a healthier Bastrop County.

BCCHH Partners

- City of Bastrop
- City of Smithville
- City of Elgin
- Bastrop County
- Bastrop County Cares
- Bastrop County Long Term Recovery Team
- Beautiful Beginnings
- Career Tracks
- HEAL Alliance
- Homes for Good Foundation
- Methodist Healthcare Ministries
- Rural Whole Health Coalition
- Save an Angel
- Smithville Community Clinic
- Smithville Hospital Authority Board
- Texas Center for Local Food
- Texas Housing Foundation



SAFE TOYS & GIFTS MONTH - DECEMBER

By: Adriana Rodriguez, Information Specialist BCPHD

The Gift of Safety

December is Safe Toys and Gifts month!

Here are some tips to make sure the gifts you give this Holiday are safe for your loved ones:

- Inspect toys often.
- Make sure the toy is age and skill appropriate.

- Avoid toys with ropes, cords, or heating elements.
- Avoid toys with sharp edges or points.
- Avoid small parts that could act as a choking hazard for young children. If it can fit through a toilet paper roll, it is too small.
- Only gift crayons and markers labeled as “nontoxic.”
- Read all instructions and safety warnings.



BASTROP COUNTY HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE COLLABORATIVE

By: Amy Mills, Grants Coordinator, BCPHD

Create a Job, Save a Job

Every community needs a strong healthcare workforce pipeline to ensure access to timely healthcare for all residents. Bastrop County is a healthcare professional shortage area, and with our growing population, we face an urgent need to develop a community-led strategy to address this shortage and grow our local healthcare workforce pipeline.

The Bastrop County Healthcare Workforce Collaborative exists to engage the community in growing and supporting a strong, local healthcare workforce pipeline as a means to increase access to healthcare for all residents, and to support more local residents in entering healthcare careers that provide stable employment & economic stability.

Healthcare is Texas' largest industry and jobs in the sector provide economic stability and stable employment, but there are significant barriers to accessing healthcare career training/education.

Bastrop County is home to thousands of talented, compassionate and hard working people, eager to enter the healthcare field, who just need some support to get there. Through a grant provided by the St. David's Foundation, we are able to support the recruitment and placement of at least 125 local residents into healthcare careers.

Taking the Next Step

The entire community has a role to play in creating an environment that supports the development of a strong healthcare workforce pipeline. If you are a student who is interested in participating in this program, contact **Career Tracks** (also known as the Smithville Workforce Training Center) at **512-237-7435**.



IT'S GOING TO GET FREEZING COLD: ARE YOU READY?

Submitted by: Bastrop County Office of Emergency Management

It's coming....Those days of hot chocolate in front of the fireplace or hunkering down on the couch under warm blankets with the pups watching that favorite Hallmark movie. But somewhere in between, those cool days can turn to bone-chilling ones. Ranchers could find themselves busting ice from water troughs for their livestock while tree branches loaded with ice could snap causing electric lines to fall. So, take the time now, **TO BE READY. TO BE PREPARED.** The aftermath of a severe winter weather storm can create havoc and even destruction as we have seen in the past several years.

During these mild days of December, make your house winter ready. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) suggests these items to include on your **house preparedness checklist**:

- Clean gutters.
- Have your chimney inspected and cleaned if necessary.
- Caulk and weather strip doors and windows. Insulate attics and exposed pipes.
- Install and test smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors.

Remember that neighbors and those most vulnerable may need your help with these tasks.

IT'S GOING TO GET FREEZING COLD (CONT.)

Moving indoors, if you already have **supplies for those days of sheltering in place** when travel is too dangerous and non-essential, take time to do the following:

- Check expiration dates on non-perishable food and medications. Replenish if necessary. Remember, a 72-hour supply of food, water and medication is recommended for every household member.
- Don't forget a manual can opener and a phone power bank in case the electricity is interrupted.

On those days being bound to the house without electricity, temperatures can easily become uncomfortable. But, **there are simple things you can do to tolerate low indoor temperatures.**

- Stay physically active.
- Dress in extra layers of clothing along with a hat, gloves, and shoes.
- Have extra blankets to bundle up in .
- Open curtains for the natural warmth of the sunshine.

Never attempt to warm a room with candles, stovetop burners, an open oven door or any other fire hazard. Space heaters are convenient, but they, too, can pose a fire threat if not used properly.

When using space heaters, follow these guidelines set out by the National Weather Service (NWS):

- Place the heater level on a nonflammable surface. Make sure this area is a KID FREE ZONE.
- Plug the heater directly into a wall outlet allowing at least a 3-foot radius.
- Don't leave the heater running while away or while sleeping.

Portable generators can be an excellent power source, especially when electricity is interrupted. But the Texas Department of Insurance reminds us to follow instructions provided with the portable generator to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning, the silent killer.

Other **reminders** include the following:

- Only add fuel to a cool generator.
- Position the generator outdoors at least 20 feet away from doors, windows, and garages.
- Plug appliances into your generator using a heavy-duty, outdoor-rated extension cord. Do not use cords with cuts, tears or missing prongs.

With safe, proactive actions taken to prepare our home and those who live there, we cannot forget taking care of **pets and livestock**. Just like us humans, they, too, need these things:

- Warm shelter away from drafts
- Accessible, fresh water
- Plenty of feed

And, there are some instances, such as emergencies or essential work, when people must travel on roads slick with rain and ice.

Make travel safe as possible in these ways:

- Keep vehicles well-maintained with reliable tires.
- Maintain proper fluid levels.
- Have a full tank of gas.
- Travel with an emergency kit of necessities in case of delay in travel.
- Buckle up, slow down and maintain ample travel distance from other vehicles for a safe trip.
- Monitor road conditions at <https://drivetexas.org/>.

During these winter months, remember the 4Ps: People, Pets, Pipes and Plants.

To learn more about Why You Should Be #WinterReady, visit <https://www.ready.gov/winter-ready>.

For more information on how to plan for a winter storm, please see the image on the following page.



IT'S GOING TO GET FREEZING COLD (CONT.)

Winter Storm Planning Timeline

A few days out	The day before	During & After
<i>If the forecast calls for winter weather, start preparing now.</i>	<i>Forecast accuracy continues to improve, so keep checking the latest.</i>	<i>Remain vigilant and stay informed. Drive only if necessary.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have emergency supplies for your home & car Check your smoke and carbon monoxide detectors Replenish fuel for your car and heating sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adjust plans Have multiple ways to receive Warnings Bring pets indoors and ensure they have water 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Check on neighbors and family Properly ventilate emergency heat sources Keep generators at least 20 feet from your home Take it easy when shoveling

weather.gov

SET YOUR PHONE TO RECEIVE LIFE-SAVING ALERTS

Submitted by: Bastrop County Office of Emergency Management

SET Your Phone to SAVE YOUR LIFE

Whenever and wherever, this is one phone call you do not want to miss: **EMERGENCY ALERTS. TURN ON SMARTPHONE EMERGENCY ALERTS,** and you will receive messages that could save your life.

According to a national survey, we lead the nation! 30% of Texans currently have their smartphone emergency alerts turned off. **“Come on Texans, we’re better than that.”** We can all agree that receiving life-saving information is the first crucial step in moving to action.

There are many resources on the web to guide you in turning on smartphone emergency alerts. General instructions are included here with two helpful links:

Apple iPhone Users

1. Click on Settings
 2. Scroll down to Notifications
 3. Scroll all the way to the bottom
 4. Toggle on Emergency Alerts
- visit** <https://support.apple.com/en-us/102516>.

Android Users

1. Tap the gear icon on your home screen
2. Go to Safety and Emergency
3. Scroll to Wireless Emergency Alerts
4. Toggle on Allow Alerts

visit: <https://www.android.com/articles/emergency-phone-alerts-android/>.

Thanks to the Bastrop County Public Information Officer Stakeholder group for collaborating with us on this Emergency Alert Opt-In Campaign.

Be Ready. Be Prepared. TURN ON SMARTPHONE EMERGENCY ALERTS.

SET Your Phone TO SAVE YOUR LIFE

TURN ON Smartphone Emergency Alerts

SEASON'S EATINGS

By: Andrew Lam, Epidemiologist,
BCPHD

Holiday Food Safety

Your Bastrop County Epidemiologist wishes you all a happy holiday!

As we attend family gatherings and eat a variety of delicious foods, I want to remind everyone that we have a [foodborne illness report form](#) that you may use if any foods from a restaurant or gathering have made you sick.

There are certain bacteria that can cause people to get sick, especially during the holiday season. When it comes to foodborne illnesses, the common culprits are *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, *E. coli*, and *Norovirus*. Healthcare providers are required to report exposure to *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, and *E. coli* bacteria to the health department, after which you will hear from an epidemiologist like me, who wants to learn more about your illness and ask questions about where and what you may have been exposed to. This way, we can make sure that more people do not get sick!

What To Know

Here is some information about these bacteria and *Norovirus*:

***Campylobacter*:** This bacterium is often linked to raw or undercooked poultry. It can also be found in contaminated water, raw milk, and other foods.

***Salmonella*:** *Salmonella* is commonly found in raw or undercooked meat, poultry, eggs, and sometimes in fruits, vegetables, and processed foods.

***E. coli (Escherichia coli)*:** Harmful strains of *E. coli* are often linked to raw or undercooked ground beef, raw milk, and contaminated produce.

***Norovirus*:** *Norovirus*, sometimes called the "stomach flu" or the "stomach bug," is actually not related to the flu. Most people with norovirus illness get better within 1 to 3 days; but they can still spread the virus for a few days after.

What To Do

While medical treatment may not be needed, and most people will recover after these bacteria/viruses have cleared their system, there may be some cases where your healthcare provider will have to provide you with the appropriate treatment.

Please know that the BCPHD is always here to help, and if you have any questions you can email us at public.health@co.bastrop.tx.us.

We hope this information allows you to have a safe and healthy holiday season with your loved ones.



WORLD AIDS DAY - DECEMBER 1ST

By: Debra Seamans, Clinical Services Administrator, BCPHD

Looking Back

In June 1981, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a report describing five young men in California who developed a rare pneumonia usually seen only in people with severely weakened immune systems. None of the men knew each other, and two had died. Because all five were men who had sex with men, researchers suspected there might be a new disease spreading through sexual contact. Their early observations turned out to be right.

What We Learned

We now know this illness as AIDS, caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). HIV attacks the immune system and makes it harder for the body to fight infection. In the early years, how HIV spread was not well understood, and there was no effective treatment. Over time, scientists learned that HIV is spread through specific body fluids that enter the body through mucous membranes, broken skin, or direct injection into the bloodstream. Transmission most commonly occurs through unprotected sex or sharing needles for drug use. HIV can also be passed during pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding. It is not spread through everyday contact such as hugging, sharing dishes, or using the same toilet.

Medical Advances

A laboratory test for HIV became available in 1985, and the first medication to treat the infection was approved in 1987. Since then, major advances in HIV medicine have transformed the disease. With early

diagnosis and consistent antiretroviral treatment, people living with HIV can now live long, healthy lives. Importantly, three drugs are now available which can prevent HIV transmission and are prescribed for people who are at high risk of becoming infected.

AIDS Today

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as of 2024:

- About 40.8 million people were living with HIV
- Approximately 630,000 people died from HIV-related causes
- An estimated 1.3 million people became newly infected

In **Texas in 2023**, there were 5,084 new HIV diagnoses. About 78% of these were in men. Race and ethnicity can also shape who is affected: more than 87% of these new infections occurred among people who are Black, Hispanic, or multiracial.

Bastrop County in 2023:

- 9 new HIV cases
- This equals a rate of about 8 new cases for every 100,000 residents
- Compared to the State of Texas overall, Bastrop County has about half the rate of newly infected residents compared to the state.

Enormous progress has been made in diagnosing, treating, and preventing HIV since the first cases were recognized more than 40 years ago. Continued prevention efforts, testing, treatment access, and community support remain essential.

For more information, see CDC guidance at: <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/about/index.html>



THE TEXAS INTEGRATED COMMUNITY OPIOID NETWORK (ICON)

Submitted by Meredith O'Neal, MA, MBA – Program Manager, Texas ICON

Supported by the Texas Targeted Opioid Response, a public health initiative of the Texas Health and Human Services Commission.

Building Recovery Together in Bastrop County

Since 2022, the **Texas Integrated Community Opioid Network (ICON)** has been helping Bastrop County residents connect to treatment, recovery housing, peer support, and community resources.

Operated by **UTHealth Houston's Center for Behavioral Emergency and Addiction Research**, ICON offers **free and confidential** services to individuals and families affected by substance use disorder (SUD).

In Bastrop County, ICON's Community Health Liaison, Brandie Harris, partners closely with local organizations, schools, healthcare providers, and first responders to expand access to recovery care.

ICON provides naloxone (Narcan), an FDA-approved drug to address opioid overdose, and offers response training. ICON also assists families, caregivers and community leaders in connecting to local treatment and counseling options—all at no cost and with no insurance required.

ICON partnered with **Bastrop County Cares** to install a naloxone vending machine at 806 Water Street in Bastrop, making life-saving medication available 24/7 and free to the community. The vending machine provides individuals and families with an easy and anonymous way to access naloxone and learn how to respond to an overdose—an important step in preventing loss of life from opioid emergencies.

Since launching in Bastrop, ICON has **served more than 600 residents**, helped connect **dozens of individuals to treatment**, and distributed **hundreds of doses of naloxone** to prevent overdoses. ICON has also strengthened community resilience by **partnering with local law enforcement and hospitals** to ensure timely referrals and by hosting public education events focused on prevention, recovery, and reducing stigma.

If you or someone you know in Bastrop County needs support, reach out directly to **Brandie Harris at 512-627-7942** or **brandie.harris@uth.tmc.edu** or **call our 24/7 free and confidential helpline at 833-696-5102. To learn more or make a referral, visit sbmi.uth.edu/cbear.**



CONTACT US

The Bastrop County Public Health Department is here to provide support in all aspects of Public Health. As a newly established health department, we are not yet functioning at full capacity. Please allow us some time to respond to any comments, questions, or feedback. While you are welcome and encouraged to share this newsletter with your networks (with credit to the BCPHD), we ask that you seek permission to distribute or reproduce this work in other formats. Thank you!

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