

## ***Introduction to the History of Public Health in Rockford and Winnebago County 1854 - Present:***

These early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century present a unique opportunity to reflect on the public health challenges overcome and accomplishments achieved as a community. The progress made in terms of health improvement by any measure, whether it is increasing longevity, decreasing infant mortality or rapid decline in infectious diseases, the past century and a half in Rockford and Winnebago County has witnessed remarkable health improvement outcomes.

The roots of health protection and public health go back to the earliest years of this community. The original Board of Health was formed in 1854, only two years after the founding of the City of Rockford in 1852. These founders realized early on that “no subject is more intimately connected with the happiness and prosperity of the people than the degree of public health that they enjoy” (from Lemuel Shattuck, *A Census of the City of Boston*, 1845).

In the mid-1800’s the community’s public health efforts developed sanitation programs to improve community living conditions in neighborhoods through nuisance abatement, refuse collection, and wastewater disposal. In the early 1900’s newer public health tools included vaccination, food and milk controls, and contagious disease reporting. In the late 1900’s there was an expansion of services supported by various federal and state grants including maternal child services such as WIC and family case management and new interventions to fight HIV and AIDS and the related resurgence of tuberculosis. There was also the recognition of the increasing complexity of disease causation (e.g. chronic diseases) that substantiated social and economic factors intimately linked to health.

These interventions have, just in the last century alone (1900 – 2000) contributed to almost a 64% increase in longevity with life expectancy increasing by 30 years. Twenty-five out of those 30 years has been the result of population-based, public health interventions, including improved water supply sanitation and food protection (e.g. pasteurization of milk, etc.), improved housing conditions, wastewater management, improved nutrition, and working conditions. Five out of those 30 years of increased longevity have come from medical interventions including early childhood and adult vaccinations, and screening for early detection and treatment of disease.

The below links provide a timeline reflecting a proud and progressive history of promoting a safer and healthier community. These exceptional health gains discussed above have largely been from the often unheralded work of dedicated public health practitioners who have worked so tirelessly with community residents, families, elected officials, businesses and other community organizations. In many ways the public health challenges brought on by increased industrialization and urbanization have been overcome through an organized community response (i.e. public health). So to, the health of current and future generations will depend largely on what we as a community do collectively to assure conditions in which our residents can be healthy.

### **Links:**

*[Timeline of Public Health in Rockford and Winnebago County \(1854-present\)](#)*

*[PowerPoint Slide Presentation on History of Public Health in Winnebago County](#)*