

## 2021 CSAC CHALLENGE AWARDS-EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### A Safe Return: School Technical Assistance Team

**OVERVIEW:** The School Technical Assistance Team (STAT) works closely with school communities to safely bring back students and staff to K-12 campuses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**CHALLENGE:** Our greatest challenges have been keeping students and staff safe at schools, preventing the spread of COVID-19 in schools, and educating schools on ever-changing safety requirements and best practices. LA County has over 1.5 million children between ages 5-17, and over 3,200 public, charter, and private schools spread over 80 school districts. It is over 4,000 square miles in size and is one of the most populous and diverse counties in the country. We needed to create a program that would serve all schools in Los Angeles County throughout the pandemic; flexibility and sustainability were key to the implementation of this program. In addition, we needed a strong evaluation component to assess the effectiveness of the program and to inform changes and improvements throughout its duration.

**SOLUTION:** In September 2020, as schools prepared to bring students and staff back to campus for the first time in more than 6 months, the LA County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) created the Schools Technical Assistance Team (STAT), comprised of a large team of Health Educators managed and supported by administrative and analytic staff. Both the State and LA County had strict Health Officer Orders and limitations on how schools were allowed to re-open. The STAT was designed to provide direct assistance to every TK-12 school in LA County through in-person site visits focusing on how to implement the requirements and best practices spelled out in LACDPH's Reopening Protocols for K-12 Schools. STAT has adapted to the needs of our school communities as local, state, and federal guidance has evolved over the past year. We assisted school districts in creating their district-wide COVID-19 staff trainings. We trained school nurses in exposure management and in best practices for bringing back students with complex medical needs. We implemented a Parent Ambassador program, to empower parents to promote COVID awareness and safety in their schools. We have expanded our technical assistance to include contact tracing, in response to the recent surge in COVID cases at schools. We continue to adapt in every way necessary to ensure schools are a safe place for students and staff during the pandemic.

**INNOVATION:** Beginning in the fall of 2020, the STAT used multiple innovative strategies to develop a model for how to re-open schools safely. The STAT provided personalized school visits using a checklist based on the Reopening Protocols for K-12 Schools (Protocols). The site visits allowed for visualization of schools' ideas and interpretations of the

Protocols. The STAT followed up to provide recommendations to strengthen the school's mitigation strategies and then followed up again to make certain they were able to implement those recommendations. The in-person site visits and ongoing technical assistance at each K-12 school created strong partnerships and bonds between LACDPH and the school communities on a level that had not previously existed. The STAT worked with the entire school community to build trust, from school district personnel and administrators to teachers, parents and students. Training and working with school nurses in particular established them as exposure management experts at their schools. In addition, the STAT implemented innovative collaborations with other LACDPH COVID response teams including Acute Communicable Disease Control, Outbreak Management Branch, Environmental Health, and the Community Liaison Branch. These collaborations not only provided support to each of the teams but also ensured consistent health education messaging and guidance. In terms of data and evaluation, the STAT Analytic Team created a multi-layered data system, where STAT members could document on virtual forms in real time, with information uploaded immediately to the databases. This allowed for prompt data evaluation. It was highly adaptable and informed the evolution of the STAT procedures and practices.

**RESULTS:** STAT completed nearly 2,500 individual visits to K-12 schools between September 2020 and September 2021. Moreover, between September 2020 and June 2021, over 4,136 technical assistance calls were completed by the team, including 2,537 initial calls to schools newly re-opening, and 1,599 individual requests for information or assistance through the Community Liaison Branch Call Center line. Remarkably, among the 3,200 schools and over 1.5 million students served in Los Angeles County, there were only 138 unique epidemiologically-linked outbreaks in K-12 settings between October 2020-September 2021. These outbreaks impacted 456 staff and 504 students.

**REPLICABILITY:** The STAT model has proven to be flexible, adaptable, and sustainable. The STAT administrative team wrote solid protocols, procedures, and policies that are customizable to any county. We are happy to share what we have learned with all of our public health partners wishing to replicate the STAT program.

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**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS:** [STAT Flyer](#), [TK-12 Schools Protocols training for School Nurse](#), [School Nurse training on Bringing back students with special health care needs](#).