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MCHD GRADUATE STUDENTS GIVE PRESENTATIONS AT STATE PUBLIC HEALTH CONFERENCE

MORGANTOWN, WV — Two Monongalia County Health Department graduate students gave presentations at the recent West Virginia Public Health Association’s annual conference held at Canaan Valley Resort in Davis in September.

Lauren E. Branch, MPH, who now works as a grant writer at MCHD as she pursues her Ph.D. at West Virginia University School of Public Health, discussed her dissertation topic, “Cyber Threats to Health Care Organizations.” Brittany Irick, a master of public health graduate student at WVU School of Public Health, completed an internship at MCHD in July and discussed “Monitoring the Health Status of First Responders in an Emergency Preparedness Exercise.” The two made their presentations to nurses in attendance at the conference, which was held Sept. 19-22.

Branch, a native of Elkridge, Maryland, was graduated from WVU in 2010 with a biology degree. She became inspired by recent events when three West Virginia hospitals had their electronic systems hacked. A New York hospital spent $10 million trying to rebuild its system after an attack, she said.

“With ransomware, hackers are holding entire organizations hostage for money or they will cut off access to electronic files,” Branch added. “They are asking for money, but most hospitals won’t pay it. The FBI says not to pay the money.”

For her presentation, Branch detailed anatomy of a ransomware attack and assembled a timeline of attacks that have taken place. “I think it’s important to highlight risks hospitals are facing regarding this type of threat, and I discussed some of the different organizational outcomes of these incidents,” she said.

Irick, a native of Hanover, Wyoming County, was graduated from WVU in 2016 with a degree in Human Nutrition and Food. She is focusing her master’s capstone project on one aspect of a multi-agency, statewide emergency drill conducted in July with military, first responders, law enforcement and public health officials, including MCHD, participating. The drill, called Operation Dawson Storm, took place in Morgantown and Preston and Kanawha counties.

During her presentation, Irick discussed her project studying health of first responders pre- and post-drill as part of a framework created by National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) called Emergency Responders Health Monitoring Surveillance, or ERHMS. “The main goal of it is to monitor the short-term and long-term illnesses and injuries in first responders,” she said.

Irick created two questionnaires, one for first responders to fill out prior to the drill and one after, asking them health questions related to their ability to function during the drill. Fifty-two respondents filled out pre-drill questionnaires and 33 respondents filled out post-drill questionnaires.

“If we have an emergency that takes place, we don’t want to send first responders if they have serious medical conditions,” Irick said. “It may affect their ability to take care of other people. It might put them in a situation in which they might be asked to do something and it might create other injuries.”
Irick worked on her project with Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Commander Jill Shugart, MSPH, Assistant Program Coordinator of Emergency Preparedness and Response at NIOSH. Because health monitoring and surveillance during this response provided an opportunity to see ERHMS in a real-world setting, Shugart traveled from Atlanta to participate in the drill.

Both Branch and Irick created posters about Operation Dawson Storm that were on display during the conference. Branch was selected to present her poster to all attendees at a banquet. “I explained what a multi-jurisdictional response to a radiation event in our area involves, and what lessons were learned from this experience,” Branch said.

Bobbi Sykes, director of Practice-Based Learning in WVU’s Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences and mentor to both students, noted that Branch’s poster was selected to be presented because it was a comprehensive summary of a complex exercise. “Her description of the scenario and responding agencies was relevant and of great interest to the audience of public health professionals,” Sykes said.

Robert White, MPH, regional epidemiologist at MCHD, also attended the conference. “Lauren and Brittany were excellent presenters at the West Virginia Public Health Conference,” he said. “They represented the School of Public Health and the Monongalia County Health Department and we’re proud that they could advance public health issues within West Virginia.”

Dr. Lee B. Smith, executive director of MCHD and county health officer, noted that he appreciated the hard work staff members completed in capturing the research.

“These studies mark the important work being done and how MCHD is contributing to the body of knowledge unique to public health and the advancement of science, which benefits us all,” he said. “We truly appreciate the efforts of these two individuals.”

For more information about Monongalia County Health Department, visit MCHD’s website at www.monchd.org.

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