

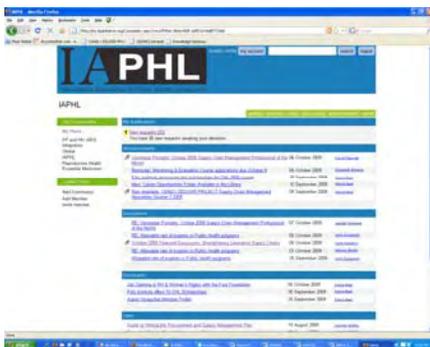


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**DELIVER PROJECT**

## Success Story

# Public Health Logisticians Worldwide Share Their Expertise Online



Members use the IAPHL website to access resources and solutions to public health logistics challenges. The listserv facilitates active discussions among members on relevant topics.

**“The topic was very relevant to my day-to-day activities, thus suggestions offered could easily be used to overcome daily challenges faced.”**

**-IAPHL member**

### OCTOBER 2009

This publication was produced for review by the U.S. Agency for International Development. It was prepared by the USAID | DELIVER PROJECT, Task Order 1.

For those who manage public health supply chains in the developing world, it is difficult to maintain a cadre of well-trained logisticians. While traditional workshops and trainings are widely used and they play an important role in every strategy to improve supply chain performance, support and access to information is often missing after the workshop is over. Leveraging the ever-increasing availability of the Internet, the USAID | DELIVER PROJECT set out to provide a new tool for public health logisticians by developing an online community of practice—the International Association for Public Health Logisticians (IAPHL).

In 2006, 23 people from 12 different countries attended a training course to master basic logistics principles and to find solutions for some of the logistics challenges they face at home. After three weeks, their time together ended and everyone returned home, taking with them some exciting new ideas to share and new skills to apply to their supply chain programs. From their comments, new ideas and skills were not the only things they valued and learned during the course. One participant shared, “I liked getting to hear about real examples from the field, including those of participants.” Another enthused about “the network of logistics experts that I now have across the globe!” In the weeks following the course, however, the strength of this network seemed to fade as emails from the group slowed and eventually ended.

At conferences, workshops, and trainings, we have all seen this same scenario—excitement is generated when people from several countries come together, share and learn from one another, only to return home unable to continue the collaborative relationships they had formed. The lack of venues to increase professional knowledge and skills, or to share lessons learned with peers, poses a specific challenge for public health logisticians working in resource-constrained settings. Having witnessed this phenomena after several courses, over the years, the USAID | DELIVER PROJECT started making concrete plans in 2006 to remedy this problem.

In the spring of 2007, project staff and all alumni with an email address—approximately 300 people—were notified that the project was working on a solution to address the problem of weak networks among public health logisticians. The solution would be an online community of practice, which is a group of professionals with a common interest—in this case, public health professionals managing public health supply chains—that share professional knowledge and information, leading to increased competency and innovation.

Potential members throughout the world were asked to register with a website that the project set up on the Implementing Best Practices' Knowledge Gateway to manage the group's communication. In just a few months, the IAPHL was formed. Their mission—to promote existing ties among colleagues, facilitate the addition of new colleagues, and create an environment for technical exchange and professional growth.

While these initial steps were straightforward, a key challenge quickly became evident—people registered, but no one posted questions, comments, or experiences to the website. The project's attention shifted to developing a strategy to increase and maintain online member participation. Based on observations from existing online discussions, research on effective communities of practice, and lessons learned for generating online participation among students from online course instructors, the IAPHL adopted several practices:

- Feature one member each month so other members can get to know each another and their work.
- Identify specific topics for guided discussions.
- Provide feedback to those making online contributions.
- Use member contributions as a way to prompt discussions; ask follow-on questions or request clarification.
- Post newsletters or other articles, such as the project's Supply Chain Management quarterly e-newsletter.

As a result of the new practices, preparations for formal discussion included forming a group that could determine “What do we want members to take away from this discussion?” Such a group also develops prompting questions related to the main objectives of the discussion. Identifying advisors and other potential contributors with experience in a technical area plays an important role in making any IAPHL discussion a success. These experts in their field help the project by helping to develop the topic prior to the discussion, identifying the best resources for posting, responding to member postings, or a combination of these functions.

According to a recent member survey, 72 percent of respondents agreed that there were many discussion topics of interest to them and that pertain to their work. In the past year, IAPHL members have independently reached out to one another, seeking information on a variety of topics. These initial queries resulted in several discussions on: how to improve reporting rates, what logistics management information tools for commodities exist, determining an acceptable rate of expiry, improving logistics knowledge and skills, accounting for stock discrepancies, and several other issues. Explaining what was so enjoyable about the IAPHL discussion, one IAPHL member said, “The topic was very relevant to my day-to-day activities thus suggestions offered could easily be used to overcome daily challenges faced.”

The IAPHL, a virtual community of practice, is the only forum where supply chain management professionals working in public health around the world can ask questions, share successes, and post new resources. Otherwise, their contact is limited to conferences, trainings, workshops, and email exchanges, in many cases, with professionals they already know.

While we can do our best to design appropriate and effective logistics systems, implementation and ongoing maintenance of those systems relies on skilled and knowledgeable individuals with access to improved solutions and new ways to use technologies. By supporting and nurturing the IAPHL virtual community of practice, the USAID | DELIVER PROJECT encourages growth in the ability of those responsible for the logistics systems to manage health commodities at a global, regional, and country level. As more and more members initiate discussions on the IAPHL listserv by sharing their real-life logistics challenges and successes, other members' gain access to solutions and the public health supply chains are strengthened.

*The USAID | DELIVER PROJECT, Task Order 1, is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, and implemented by John Snow, Inc. The project improves essential health commodity supply chains by strengthening logistics management information systems, streamlining distribution systems, identifying financial resources for procurement and supply chain operations, and enhancing forecasting and procurement planning. The project also encourages policymakers and donors to support logistics as a critical factor in the overall success of their health care mandates.*

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The authors' views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

**USAID | DELIVER PROJECT**

John Snow, Inc.

1616 Fort Myer Drive, 11th Floor

Arlington, VA 22209 USA

Phone: 703-528-7474

Fax: 703-528-7480

Email: [askdeliver@jsi.com](mailto:askdeliver@jsi.com)

Internet: [deliver.jsi.com](http://deliver.jsi.com)