

REGION 3 PPHR CENTER

Countering Harmful and Misleading Health Rumors: A Talbot County Success Story



INTERVENTION

The [Region 3 Public Health Preparedness and Response \(PHPR\) Center](#) organized an interactive 1.5 hour [rumor management strategic planning session](#) with Eastern Shore counties' (Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Talbot, Queen Anne's) (MD) health department (HD) personnel involved in communications. During the session, attendees learned how to counter rumors, applying concepts from the [Practical Playbook for Addressing Health Rumors](#), and worked together to develop draft strategic plans to counter at least one rumor that undermines public health preparedness and response in their community. Following each session, participants were asked to finalize their strategic plan(s), which could incorporate a constellation of interventions appropriate for participants' settings, and implement them over the course of 3 months.

Following the strategic planning session, we provided technical assistance on improving health literacy to Talbot County's solo Public Information Officer (PIO), Josh Weber, upon request. This support included sharing resources from the Maryland Department of Health's Digital Playbook, notably its Plain Language Standards.

OUTCOMES

Using concepts and tools from our Region 3 PPHR Center strategic planning session, along with follow-up technical assistance, Josh developed an Anticipatory Framework for Health Literacy & Rumor Management. The framework is comprised of three pillars (1. Risk Assessment & Scenario Planning; 2. Infrastructure and Preparedness; 3. Proactive Communication) and is designed to support solo PIOs and small health department teams in anticipating, tracking, and addressing escalating rumors. It also features a replication guide to support its adoption in other counties and for different rumor scenarios. To supplement the framework, Josh developed Response Templates based on likely rumor scenarios in Talbot County, each with a timeline and editable response script. Together, these organizational processes strengthen institutional capacity and literacy around rumor management and better prepare Josh to address future escalating rumors in Talbot County.

Anticipatory Framework for Health Literacy & Rumor Management

A Replication Guide for Solo PIOs and Local Health Departments

Overview

A lightweight, proactive communication framework designed for solo PIOs and small health department teams. The framework helps prepare for likely misinformation scenarios before they occur, using free tools and requiring only 15-20 minutes per day. It's not a formal program; it's a way to organize your professional workflow so you're not constantly scrambling.

The Challenge for Small Teams

Misinformation Response Templates

Talbot County Health Department

For: Josh Weber (PIO)

Purpose: Quick reference templates for responding to misinformation

Last Updated: December 2025

How to Use This Document

When misinformation is detected: 1. Identify which scenario it falls under 2. Select the appropriate template 3. Customize with specific details 4. Post response within timeline guidelines 5. Log in tracking document

Response Structure: **The 3 A's - Acknowledge** - Show you heard the concern - **Accurate Info** - Provide correct information with source - **Action** - Invite them to connect for more information

SPOTLIGHT

On December 1, 2025, Josh was a featured speaker for the MD Consumer Health Info Hub webinar, Advancing Health Literacy in Maryland State and Local Public Health Organizations, where he presented the rumor management framework he developed based on the PPHR intervention and Maryland's health literacy goals. His experience showed how a solo PIO or small team can take proactive, intentional steps to prepare for rumors and advance health literacy:

- Webinar recording: <https://umd.app.box.com/s/b34gklv8995xo04m7so7rg6sp2lc5oh2>
- Slides: <https://umd.app.box.com/s/6xclg2pxlku6isq9a8kjh19p2vls54rq>

NEXT STEPS

To build on this work, Josh and the Talbot County Health Department are participating in the Tackling Rumors and Understanding & Strengthening Trust in Public Health (TRUST) in Action project, funded by the de Beaumont Foundation. This effort will engage Talbot County HD leadership and local trusted partners to refine Josh's rumor mitigation plans and increase message uptake and effectiveness. This will include revising the Anticipatory Framework for Health Literacy & Rumor Management and the Response Templates, working with local champions to ensure its availability in other languages, and producing a case study to guide other counties and regions in adopting these tools and developing their own rumor mitigation plans.